NETHERVALE BOOK 2
the Wicked Prince
A LITTLE MERMAID RETELLING
RACHEL ROWLANDS

the Wicked Prince

A LITTLE MERMAID RETELLING

Book 2 in the Nethervale series

RACHEL ROWLANDS

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For more information, visit: www.racheljrowlands.com

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Part One

Before

Chapter One

“Come on, let’s go to the surface now – I don’t want to miss the sunset!” Pearl cried. She spoke so enthusiastically that bubbles streamed from her nose. She grabbed Kyra’s hand. “And I want to see Rhydian!”

“Can I finish this first?” Kyra asked, and held up the dead fish she’d been stripping the meat from, ready for their meal with their father tonight. “I really don’t think you should keep going up there to see Rhydian anyway, Pearl. It’s too dangerous to keep exposing ourselves to humans. Especially to a prince.”

Kyra and Pearl had come of age just over a year ago, and went to the surface together regularly. Most Mer who liked visiting the surface did so in a pairing or in threes – it was safer. Her little sister was the only mermaid she knew who wanted to go to the surface *this* frequently. She even went alone, when Kyra couldn’t go with her, which was how she’d first seen the prince.

“Stick it in a clamshell – it can wait!” said Pearl. “And we won’t be in any danger, I promise. We’ll keep out of the way, like we always do! There are plenty of rocks to hide behind.”

Kyra smiled faintly at her enthusiasm. They’d discovered the white cliffs a while ago, as they’d ventured away from their usual spot seeking out waterfalls. Their father, Einar, had told them to be more careful – the land mass the cliffs belonged to was a vast kingdom called Lumen, home to many, many humans. Their father wouldn’t like it, if he knew what they were doing. Or if he knew one of his daughters was infatuated with a prince.

“I’ve brought my journal!” Pearl held up the box with her journal inside, bubbles rushing around it.

The box kept it safe from water damage until they entered a cave above the surface, where she could write in peace. Pearl's eyes were glittering with mischief as she hugged the box to her chest. All young Mer attended classes inside secluded caves and alcoves that humans couldn't reach, their torsos rising out of the water, where they learned about the human world. Its dangers, how it worked. Young Mer were taught to read and write human letters in these caves, where it was dry, in case they were ever captured. Other classes about the Mer world took place in underwater schools.

"We can wait until we see Rhydian," Pearl continued, "and we can see if we can command the wind and waves again—"

"If we're going to develop our powers, it'll happen when they're ready," Kyra advised. "Mother and Father never developed them, and they were well-respected Mer anyway. We'll be fine without them."

"I know! But it'd be so much fun, wouldn't it?" Excitement was laced through Pearl's voice. "We could play with ships sometimes, if we could command the wind. Help them on their way."

"It would be fun," said Kyra. She was smiling, but there was a pang in her chest as she spoke, and she was sure her true emotions showed on her face.

"I'm sorry," said Pearl softly. "I shouldn't have mentioned it. I know having powers would have helped you during your warden training."

"It's okay," said Kyra. "It's not your fault. You were always there to support me, and I appreciated it."

"You don't need the wardens – or to become one of them," Pearl said, and she echoed Kyra's earlier sentiment when she added, "You're brilliant anyway. You'll be fine without them."

Kyra laughed, grabbed a large clamshell from one of the alcoves in the cave wall and stuffed the fish inside, snapping the clam shut. "Let's go," she said. "We need to be careful, Pearl."

"I know." Pearl grinned. Her white teeth were almost as pale as her skin. Although the scales on her face were tinged a fainter shade of blue than Kyra's, they stood out, like sea moss on a rock.

"If Father asks, we were chasing waterfalls again," said Kyra.

They swam from their underwater cave, arm in arm, passing beneath a group of whales lazily making their way through the ocean, giant shadows in the murk. Their song echoed through the deep, low and beautiful, their

calls rising and falling in pitch. Kyra paused to watch them roll by overhead, hand to her chest.

“The Sea Mother’s blessing!” Pearl said, squeezing Kyra’s arm. “From her messengers themselves. She’s watching over us today.”

They rose to the surface, the sea growing brighter as they ascended. The air was warm when they broke the waves, the clouds already tinged pink and orange, a fiery blaze across the sky. Kyra could never quite get used to the feeling of the sun on her face; she didn’t enjoy it like Pearl did.

“Beautiful,” Pearl breathed. Her pale skin had turned as bright as the sky in the rays of the sinking sun.

They swam with their heads above the waves until they neared the white cliffs, which were splashed with vermillion light. The sun was a disc on the horizon now, the sea aflame. A building was nestled in amongst the cliffs and the trees, white and cream, all squared corners and pointed rooftops. The windows gleamed and glittered down at them.

“I hope the prince comes down today,” said Pearl eagerly. “I want you to see him. You *still* haven’t.”

“As long as he doesn’t see *us*.”

“You never know, a little danger could awaken some power in us.” Pearl nudged her playfully, showing her teeth. “And anyway, Grandmother says humans tell tales about mermaids all the time, and even though they have dragons and ice trolls and other creatures on land, mermaids are still a myth. Even if anyone spotted us briefly, they’d convince themselves we were an illusion.”

They glided into the inlet and the cove, which was encircled by white cliffs covered in green shrubs. They kept close to some rocks at the edges that they could hide behind. Pearl set her box on a rock and lifted the lid, revealing a white book with a blue ribbon poking from the pages. Kyra had purchased it – along with the box – for her years ago, from a merchant who sold treasures from the human world.

“I have to tell you something,” said Pearl quietly. She wedged her box between some of the rocks, where it would be safe, and turned to Kyra.

“What is it?” Kyra didn’t like the way her sister’s forehead was furrowed. It must be bad news.

“I have a plan,” Pearl continued. “You know I’ve always wanted to be part of the human world, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Kyra said slowly. “You know that’s not possible. You can’t go to the human world.”

“It is possible,” Pearl whispered. The sun gleamed off her white hair, making it glow. “With the sea witch’s help.”

Kyra was too stunned to say anything. Had the sun addled her brain, fried it so she hadn’t heard her properly? Her mouth opened and closed uselessly. “The sea witch?” she finally spluttered.

“I know she’s in exile—”

“Pearl, she’s not only in exile, she’s dangerous! They say she controls the giant sea serpent because she has a piece of its *soul*!”

“That’s a rumour! She’s helped people, Kyra. Seira said one of her cousins had a friend with a missing child, and the sea witch helped her find them again.”

“And at what cost was this child found?” said Kyra. “What were the terms?”

Her sister didn’t respond.

“Isn’t visiting the surface enough? Do you really have to have legs too?”

Pearl wasn’t looking at her; she’d turned back to the beach, as if searching for any sign that Rhydian was on his way.

“You aren’t one of them,” Kyra said quietly. “You belong in the sea. With your family and friends.”

“We’re more like humans than you think.” Pearl’s blonde hair was a sunny halo around her scaly cheeks. She brushed it aside with a webbed hand. “Humans once lived in the sea as Mer, did you know that? We could shift shape at will. Some of us ventured too far inland, and they changed. They named the new world above the sea Nethervale, but when they failed to return to the sea, they lost their connection to the Sea Mother. The rest of us stopped visiting land, and in turn lost our ability to change—”

“Pearl,” Kyra said gently. “That’s a myth.”

“It’s not! It’s true! We’ve lost the ability to do it naturally. The sea witch has found a way to force it. That’s how she can help me – she knows how to do it!”

“She’s in exile for a reason, Pearl. She uses tainted magic forbidden by the Sea Mother! And she trains other young Mer girls who were exiled to become ruthless. You don’t want her help – you aren’t like that.”

Pearl reached out, grasping Kyra’s arm, and when she spoke again, she sounded pained. “I have to *try*.” Her mouth was curled, trembling. “Father

would have me settle down with a warden, or merchant, and stay in the sea forever in some cave. I don't want that. I want to explore, see the world above the sea. Feel the sun on my face all the time."

Kyra didn't know what to say to change her mind.

Pearl sighed when she didn't reply. "I want to see Nethervale – all of it. Not just glimpses in the distance. I want to *walk* the land. Discover things. Experience it. And I *know* the prince will feel the same way about me when he meets me properly. I saw the way he looked at me."

"He's already *seen* you?"

"Briefly. I was sitting on a rock, looking for him. I disappeared before he could realise what was going on."

"The prince doesn't even know you!" Kyra replied. "You're putting yourself in danger, Pearl!"

"He will know me – in time – if the sea witch helps me," said Pearl. "This is what I want. You have to trust me."

"We don't know him, though. He's human, and you're a mermaid. If the prince ever hurt you, I don't know what I'd do."

"You're so dramatic."

"I'm not being dramatic. I mean it, Pearl."

"He's not going to hurt me," said Pearl. "And besides, you'd kill anyone who hurt me, wouldn't you, my fearsome sister?" She gave Kyra a wicked smile, showing her pointed teeth. "You really should be more trusting. Humans aren't all bad."

Voices floated in on the breeze.

"It must be Rhydian!" Pearl cried, peeping through a gap in the rocks. She giggled. "He's brought more men with him! Some of them have their shirts off! Look!"

Kyra snorted. "I can see that."

Pearl craned her neck to try to see the men. Before Kyra could say anything, her sister swam around the rock and further into the cove, keeping to the sides where the froth splashing against the rocks kept her somewhat hidden.

"Pearl!" Kyra hissed, following.

Her sister drew up behind a rock, far too close to the humans for Kyra's liking. Pearl clutched the rock with both hands, claws fixed to the stone, and watched them, her eyes gleaming with fascination. "Look at him," she

whispered, sinking down slightly, as if she'd had the breath knocked out of her. "There's my Rhydian."

Kyra looked – and her stomach tipped. Detached from the rest of the group was a man with ruffled brown hair and eyes the same shade. His chest was bronzed from time spent in the sun; his arms were muscular. He was shaking sand out of a white tunic threaded with gold, his bare feet planted in the sand.

"Such gorgeous blonde hair," Pearl crooned, and Kyra realised she was referring to a different man.

The rest of the men were gathered a short distance away, laughing and talking. One of them was sitting on a loose log, legs outstretched, his blonde hair blowing in the wind. His clothing was more elaborate than what the others wore: a white shirt, a deep blue jacket with gold vines twisting across the arms and a shiny belt buckle stamped at his waist, etched with the figure of a bright woman with shimmering sunshine hair.

"Oh, don't mind Nicholas," the man in the jacket called to the others. "He always has to spoil a good time. He's no fun at all. He only comes here at the beck and call of his father. He may as well be a servant himself. He's friends with half of them anyway."

The others roared with laughter. Kyra didn't like the sneer in the blonde man's voice.

"Good one, Rhydian," said another man, clapping him on the back.

"Don't let my mother hear you say that – 'Your Highness' or 'Prince Harcourt' only. Better start practising 'Your Majesty' for when I'm king, too." He shot his friend a wry smile. "You better practise, too, Nicholas."

Kyra's heart clenched for the man with the soft brown hair – Nicholas. They were mocking him, but he didn't show any emotion. He shrugged instead. Laughter echoed in her own ears and she felt like she'd been flung into her own memories, when she'd been training to become a warden like her father, Einar. The way the other Mer looked at her, their toothy, fanged smiles. *Poor Kyra, trained so hard to fail! The Sea Mother must be embarrassed! A shame she doesn't have powers like the best of us.*

"Shut up, Rhydian," said a man with much darker skin and closely cropped dark hair. He crossed the beach to Nicholas's side. "Let's head back."

Nodding, Nicholas turned and carved a path away from the cove. The dark-skinned man followed, while the rest of the men broke out into fresh

laughter.

“We should go, too,” Kyra said quietly. Her sister’s gaze was fixed on this Rhydian, who was throwing sand at one of his friends and laughing. “Pearl?”

“Okay, okay,” said Pearl.

Pearl turned from the rock – the misty look was still in her eyes and Kyra knew that before long, she’d come back. Or would she go to the sea witch first?

Chapter Two

It had been weeks since their visit to the cliffs, when Kyra had first seen Rhydian. Kyra was inside their underwater cave system, preparing knives on a makeshift belt at her waist. The cave system she inhabited with her sister and their father, Einar, was big enough for a Mer family of eight, so they had plenty of room, including their own private caves for sleeping. Pearl had filled hers with knick-knacks from the surface; Kyra liked to keep hers plain, with soft sponges to curl up on to sleep. No one went in their mother's old cave anymore. The tunnel system they inhabited led to a garden of coral and seaweed at the back, and from there, it was easy enough to follow the current to the hub of the Mer kingdom, and the Mer palace.

Kyra had a job escorting a merchant across a dangerous part of the sea later in the evening, and wanted to make sure she had the right weapons. The rest of the blades were laid out on the stone in front of her. Her deep blue-green tail was folded beneath her – sleek as a knife, with a rush of fronds down the back, and the tip extending into a piercing double-scythe.

"Kyra, you have to come with me!" Pearl screeched, rushing inside the cave suddenly in a flow of bubbles, and making Kyra start.

"What's the matter?" said Kyra, shoving a knife into her belt.

"I went to the surface," Pearl said, the words coming fast. "I was following one of Rhydian's ships and there was a storm and – we have to help them! Please, they could die!"

"They?"

"Rhydian, the crew. The brown-haired man Nicholas was there too—"

Nicholas. She thought of his soft brown eyes, the way they'd laughed at him and he'd shrugged it off. Something about him made her heart clench. She knew what it was like to be laughed at, seen as *lesser*. And how many more were on the ship – servants who had no choice but to follow their

prince? When she'd been training to be a warden, she'd not only wanted to protect the mermaid royals from harm, but those who worked for them, too.

"Let's go," she said.

When they broke the surface of the water, the sea was on fire.

Orange was reflected on the rippling waves. The ship was pluming with thick black smoke and surging, licking flames. On board the ship, men and women were crying out, screaming. The sky was stormy, lanced with lightning, rain lashing against the ship but doing nothing to quell the flames, which were blazing too fiercely to be extinguished. The sails were burning to charred ashes.

"Something must have exploded!" Pearl cried. "We have to do something! You remember the human resuscitation technique I taught you?"

Kyra did – their grandmother, who had a fondness for humans, had first shown it to Pearl when she told them a story of rescuing a young man herself, many decades ago. It wasn't the kind of thing they learned during their schooling, even in their lessons about the human world.

"Pearl, I'm not sure if—" she began.

Before Kyra could finish, another explosion rocked the ship, booming through the night. Wood and wreckage were blasted through the air, and several people were flung from the ship. Those in the water clung to floating planks of wood in their desperation to stay alive, to avoid drowning.

"There's Rhydian!" Pearl shouted.

She pointed. To the far side of the ship, a smaller rowboat was pushing frantically away from the larger one. Rhydian was hunkered down in the middle. Two servants were paddling, trying to get the prince to safety, but a huge wave surged up as the wind gusted, flinging the ship to the side and sending them all tumbling into the sea. Thunder crashed and another streak of lightning forked over the sky.

"I'm going!" Pearl cried. She disappeared into the water with a flick of her tail.

Kyra turned back to the ship, her heart hammering in her chest. Where was Nicholas? She swam closer, until she could feel the heat of the flames pressing against her scales, the discomfort making her recoil at first. On the deck, sailors were racing around, shouting orders, but the ship looked too

badly damaged to be saved, and it was sinking fast, creaking and groaning as it went. A huge crack ran down the side, seared with black.

Another blast to her right. She cried out and flung her hands in front of her face, coughing as she was engulfed in smoke. Kyra dipped down, back into the sea, swimming away from the heat. She spun round – and nearby, a person plunged into the waters.

A halo of soft brown hair, a white shirt pluming in the water.

Nicholas.

She swam to him, her tail beating hard behind her. Humans couldn't breathe underwater. She couldn't see her sister anywhere – maybe she'd grabbed Rhydian and pulled him to safety. She had to get Nicholas to the surface before he drowned.

She locked her arms around his chest and heaved him upwards. She broke the surface and gasped – the final parts of the ship were disappearing into the ocean. She could hear humans nearby screaming as they clung to pieces of wood and wreckage. Pulling Nicholas along, she swam as fast as she could towards land.

He was heavier than she'd expected him to be, and she soon felt tired. He was slack against her, not stirring, and her throat was tight with the fear that he was dead. The white moonlight on the water charted her path, and eventually she came to the inlet and the white cliffs where she'd first seen Nicholas and the other humans.

It was deserted. She cut through the water, dragging him as far as she could, until they were in the shallows, the small waves crashing against his legs and her tail.

Out of energy, she paused to rest. She couldn't drag him any further than here. Maybe it was best to disappear now, before she was seen. There didn't seem to be anybody around. She couldn't help but look down at him, at his water-dappled face. Was he breathing? Humans couldn't survive underwater – maybe he'd swallowed some? Panic seared across her. She pushed his hair out of his eyes, marvelling at the feeling of his soft skin against her webbed hands.

"Breathe," she urged him.

She should get the water out! She clenched her fist and pounded it onto his chest, mindful to keep her claws hidden so she didn't scratch his skin. Once, twice, three times. Then he was coughing and spluttering, twisting in

the low water, head bowed, and she was splashing away as he turned his head to look at her.

Kyra hadn't got far before he fell back, eyes closed again. Had he seen her? She wasn't sure. His chest was rising and falling. She lingered there, biting her lip, curious. His shirt was open, soaked and clinging to his skin, showing his bronze chest. He was wounded, a patch of blood seeping from his side and staining the shallow water around him, as if something had struck or pierced him during his escape from the ship. It didn't look deep, but she shouldn't leave him – what if nobody found him?

She swam closer to him again, back into the shallows, her tail bumping the sand underneath the waves. His head had lolled sideways – the only part of him that wasn't being splashed by the water – his cheek caked in sand. He wasn't coherent enough to notice her. The skin of his cheek and chin was dappled with short, dark speckles. What would that feel like? She reached out, hesitating, checking he wasn't looking at her before brushing a webbed hand over his cheek.

Soft in places, gritty in others. It tickled her webbing, made her shiver.

All the risks she'd told her sister not to take, the words of caution, seemed to have left her in the face of this man. He was fascinating.

He groaned, and she started, ready to bolt. His eyes weren't open. His face was scrunched as if he were in pain and he was muttering under his breath. He didn't even seem to know she was there, and he clutched his side. Blood seeped through his clothes. She glanced around the beach; it was quiet save for the rushing waves.

He was breathing hard. Maybe he was dying? She'd got the water out of his chest, but he had a wound, and she had no idea how bad it was, or how deep.

She started to sing. It wasn't something she did often – only when a Mer died. She didn't have powers like a siren. If these *were* the man's last moments, she wanted to make them peaceful for him. The song was soft and gentle like the lapping of the sea and she stroked his cheek again as she continued the melody.

Kyra was so absorbed in her song she didn't notice him moving until his hand was touching her wrist, his fingers fluttering over her scales.

She stopped dead, freezing in place, voice cutting off. His eyes fluttered open, brown and warm, and she darted away, splashing into the deeper parts

of the sea so quickly she could only hope he hadn't noticed her, or if he had, that he believed she was a dream.

Guilt weighed down on her – there must be other humans in the water, too, but she couldn't help them. She'd already risked being seen once, a risk she probably shouldn't have taken. If Nicholas remembered seeing her… She couldn't take any more chances. He would be safe enough in the shallows until someone found him, she hoped.

Her heart thrummed as she swam away, the panic skittering inside her. She'd been foolish, put herself at great risk. She'd been warning Pearl for so long to be careful above the surface, and she'd gone against those words of advice herself.

Still, Kyra hoped Nicholas survived. And she hoped he wouldn't remember her.

Chapter Three

Her sister was gone. Not long after the shipwreck, she'd gone to the sea witch without Kyra, and she hadn't even said goodbye. It had happened almost a full moon ago – Kyra was still reeling from her encounter with Nicholas, and worrying he might remember her. She reassured herself with the thought that even if he did remember her, she was safe. Even if he told other humans about his encounter, they'd probably laugh it off. She hadn't been to the surface again since, too afraid of seeing him on the beach or a cliffside path.

Their father was under the impression Pearl had decided to visit some of their cousins for a while, in a distant corner of the sea – that had been Kyra's lie, to spare her sister. What would Kyra tell their father, if time stretched on?

Kyra had been sent one message by her sister so far, via the schools of messenger fish who carried messages back and forth for Mer people:

Kyra,

I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was leaving. When I saved Rhydian from the water after the shipwreck… I knew I wanted to go to land properly. I thought it would be easier on you, and easier for me – perhaps selfishly – if I didn't say goodbye. In truth, I didn't want you to try to talk me out of doing this. I promise I'll visit and send more messages. The sea witch gave me some potions, so I can transform sometimes to come and see you and Father. I can't do it all the time – she's only given me so many potions. I will see you soon. Please don't be angry with me.

All my love,

Pearl

Kyra sent several messages back to Pearl. None of them were answered, which only added to her stress.

Many moons went by before Pearl kept her word and came to visit. Kyra was gathering up her things in preparation for a job protecting a travelling merchant through shark-infested waters when Pearl came whizzing into the cave, a surge of bubbles flowing behind her. Her face was contorted in pain and the whites of her eyes were flecked with red.

“Pearl!” Kyra cried. “Where have you *been*? I’ve been worried, I thought you’d visit me sooner! You didn’t answer my messages. Did something happen?”

“I-I’m so sorry!” her sister sobbed. “I just… I got so caught up, living at the Whitecliff Estate, and it was all for nothing! I— Can we go somewhere to talk?”

Kyra huffed bubbles out of her nose. She set down her spear. “I suppose the merchant will have to wait for me.”

Pearl smiled; it didn’t reach her eyes. For the first time, Kyra noticed she clutched something in her hand: a curved dagger, the hilt encrusted with pale-white gems.

“Where did you get that?” Kyra asked.

“Come with me, and I’ll explain everything.”

They swam from the cave together, Kyra feeling light with relief that her sister was back at home; she’d been worrying for her safety. The water was a dark turquoise-blue as they cut through a field of coral and seagrass, weaving their way to one of their favourite spots by a huge shipwreck. It towered from the seabed like a whale skeleton, covered in grit and sand. Kyra followed her sister to a cluster of dark rocks nearby. They normally went inside the shipwreck, as Pearl loved being around human trinkets and rooms they would have occupied. Not today.

“What is it?” Kyra asked gently, as Pearl curled herself on a rock, looking incredibly small and fragile, despite her thick tail and wild ice-blonde hair.

Pearl’s expression crumpled – Kyra hadn’t seen such pain in her sister since their mother died. Pearl set the dagger on the rock beside her and buried her face in her hands, shoulders shaking with silent sobs. Eventually,

she said, “I’ve been on the surface for moons now. I thought it was all going well. But Rhydian isn’t going to marry me.”

“*What?*”

“He’s chosen someone else. He’s just working up the courage to tell me.”

“How do you know?” Kyra swam to her sister’s side, taking a position on the rock next to her. She placed a hand on her arm.

Pearl gave a hollow laugh and removed her hands from her face. “I know him well, after spending so much time there with him. He did love me, he said I’d changed him. I… I certainly loved him.” Her lip wobbled. “He talked of marrying me. I thought he was going to ask me, Kyra, I really did.” She shook her head slowly, turning to the shipwreck, a ghostly silhouette beside them, fish weaving in and out of the crevices and breakages. “Then his mother started whispering in his ear about his childhood friend, Catarina, dissuading him away from me. She came to the estate – his mother made sure of it. His mother was concerned about who he chose to marry, as a future king. She said he had to be a strong leader to rule the Kingdom of Lumen someday, with the right woman at his side. Rhydian started questioning who he should marry, too.”

“Oh, Pearl,” said Kyra softly. She rubbed the scales on her sister’s arm in comfort. “I’m so sorry.”

“So am I. That awful queen!” Her voice quivered. “But I’ve seen them together, the way he dotes on Catarina. It was never going to be me.”

“Father never has to know about this,” Kyra reassured her. “We’ll continue to tell him you were with our cousins. You can come home and put the prince behind you.”

Pearl opened her mouth and closed it again, as if trying to find the right words. She picked up the dagger from the rock, ran her hands over the hilt, her chin tipped down. “I can’t do that,” she whispered.

“Why ever not?”

“There were terms attached to going to the surface, Kyra. It was like you said before about the sea witch – there’s always a price to what she does. I signed a contract, bound by her tainted magic.”

The water felt suddenly cold around Kyra. Her heart was jumping. “And what was in this contract? What did it say?”

Her sister’s answer was so quiet, Kyra had to lean forwards to hear it. “I had to make him fall in love with me. If I failed, the condition was I’d turn

to sea foam by the next full moon – payment as part of the contract."

Thoughts of her gentle, caring sister turning to sea foam made it almost impossible to think of another way out of this situation. Imagining her disappearing, nothing more than froth on waves, made her head pound.

"There has to be something we can do," Kyra managed eventually. "This isn't fair – it's not right!"

"The sea witch did give me a way out. Kill the prince, and start working for her. She gave me this dagger to do the job."

Kyra spluttered something incomprehensible before she was able to gather herself enough to speak properly. "Kill a prince?"

Pearl nodded lamely.

Her sister, kill someone? Impossible. She'd never even harmed a fish – she refused to do any hunting and let Kyra and her father take care of their food, rather than injure another creature herself.

"I can do it," said Kyra. "I'll do it for you. Give me the dagger and tell me where to find him!"

"No. It doesn't work that way, Kyra – the contract is specific. It has to be me." She shuddered, laying the dagger flat on top of her tail, tracing the pearlescent gems. "I want him to be happy, and if that isn't with me, so be it."

"You *have* to do it! You have to kill him!" Kyra's tone was pleading now. She grabbed her sister's hands and squeezed. "You can do this. I'll help you."

Pearl shook her head. "The only way out of this contract is to die – or fulfil it. I failed to make him love me, and I failed to fulfil the contract. I won't kill him, either."

"We'll go to the estate together. I'll help you find a way. Even if *I* have to hold your hand while you drive the dagger into him."

"I've *tried* to do it already!" Pearl burst out. "Many times! While he's sleeping! Please don't make this any harder. Every single time, I can't. I love him. I won't take his life to save myself. It's wrong."

Kyra reeled away from her sister. Her scales were prickling – this prince was putting her sister's life at risk, had no care or concern for her. She'd die because of him. "You can't possibly love him enough to die for him!"

"How would you know?" Pearl cried. She was off the rock in an instant, the dagger falling to the seabed and wedging in the sand between them.

“You’ve *hardly* been in love yourself, you prefer casual encounters in caves and ruins, so don’t lecture me about relationships!”

Kyra’s tongue burned with poison as she hissed back, “It isn’t love you feel for Rhydian, it’s a fantasy! You have to kill him and save yourself!”

Pearl’s lip quivered with fresh emotion. Before Kyra could say anything else, she turned and shot away, leaving a trail of furiously swishing bubbles in her wake.

Kyra was left alone by the quiet shipwreck, the gemstone dagger gleaming by the tip of her tail.

Part Two

After

Chapter Four

They were deep in the bowels of their dark cave, and Kyra sat at the stone table where they'd once eaten together as a family, her tail-fronds and the length of her dark fin folded beneath her. Her father had arrived home recently, and he still wore shining, pearlescent bracers on his forearms and a shimmering shell-plate across his chest. Einar clutched a huge, golden trident topped with spikes and shining jewels. It was a standard armament for the wardens.

"It's too risky, Kyra," he began again.

Kyra's father should have *wanted* her to get revenge on the prince. She couldn't understand why he didn't. The prince was the reason her sister was dead, and she'd never forgive herself for their last conversation – instead of supporting Pearl, she'd argued with her. Their last moments together were filled with her own anger. Now she'd direct that at the prince; she'd snuff him out, like he had her sister. Her father disagreed, so they were arguing about it.

"He's a human *prince*," Einar said. "If they caught you—"

"A human prince so coddled, if he were a Mer, he'd have about twelve oysters pinned to his tail," Kyra argued. Mer royals wore oysters on their tails to signify their rank. Princes and princesses wore twelve. "That's probably why he broke her heart. He's spoilt, entitled. His decisions got her *killed*. I knew she never should have got involved with him."

"You can't kill a human prince!" Einar snapped. "What will happen after? They will either kill you, or put you on display as some… mermaid curiosity! We need to *talk* about this. You can't—"

"I've tried to talk to you before! You're never here," Kyra said. "Since Pearl… you're always working, distant. I need to do this. The sea witch can

make me human, I can kill the prince, and we can find some closure and peace for Pearl."

"This isn't a trifling matter, Kyra," Einar hissed, sounding like an angry blowfish that had deflated. His tail-tip swayed behind him like a shark in the shadows. "The human world doesn't work like our world does—"

"I know."

"And you'd bargain with a *witch* – one who has a sea serpent at her command! You're being foolish. Even a sea sponge couldn't be so reckless. In fact, you're being just as reckless as your sister was in going to the witch in the first place! Learn from what she did, and don't make the same mistake!"

"This is about *righting* her mistake!" Kyra argued. "It's about justice!"

"At your own expense?"

"I don't care about myself anymore! Our family has been destroyed!" she burst out. Kyra pressed her webbed hands to her forehead. "I thought you would understand! Especially after what happened with Mother."

His moon-white eyes flashed, and the spiked appendages along his jaw contracted in threat. "Do *not* bring your mother into this."

"You tried to track the Mer who killed her, for *such* a long time. You can't tell me not to do the same for Pearl."

"That was different!" Einar cried. "They were rebels, exiles, who tried to seize the throne, and the king ordered me to seek them out for treason! Your mother was a palace gardener who got in their way!"

"You can't say anything to change my mind. I'm going to see the witch."

Einar shook his head. His tight features softened, appendages relaxing into soft triangles. "Kyra, I'm trying to prevent you from making my mistakes. I should have been here, with you, after your mother died."

"You aren't here *now*. I never see you. You throw yourself into your work to distract yourself from loss – I want to take action."

He swam the short distance to the stone table and plonked himself on the stone opposite her, his huge tail curled underneath him. Kyra had always liked the tip of his tail as a child; she'd told Pearl once it looked like a massive cluster of coral. Pearl had found the tail-tip frightening when they were small – their father had told them stories of splitting the side of a ship in two with one swing.

"The witch is an outcast," Einar went on. She wanted to remind him she wasn't a child, that she knew exactly who the witch was, but he barrelled

on. “You know why she lives in the Lacuna. She’s not part of our society, Kyra. She wields tainted magic from the Sea Mother’s forbidden garden. That is why she is in exile!”

“I know.”

“What about *your* life? Your future here? You’d really see yourself an exile, too?”

Kyra narrowed her eyes. “I don’t have a future here. I failed to become a warden like you did.”

“You can join the training regime again. There will be roles to fill as older Mer hang up their tridents. You’re good at guard work, and you fight well. You’ve protected plenty of merchants from threats.”

“It doesn’t matter how well I fight. Other Mer cheated and bribed their way into positions. You know that. I failed because I wouldn’t swindle my way into a role.” She straightened her spine. “It’s behind me now. I can do this. I can put an end to this for Pearl.”

“You’re strong, my sea daughter. But you aren’t strong enough for this,” Einar said quietly. “You can’t take on the human world with the witch. It will destroy you.”

“I know you mean well, Father,” Kyra said, and touched his hand. Despite their disagreement, he cared, and he was the only family she had left. “I am going to the witch with or without your support.” An edge crept back into Kyra’s voice, and she rose up from the stone seat, her black hair rising around her face, as if hearing the call to battle. “The only thing I want now is a knife through the prince’s heart. And I won’t rest until it’s done.”

Chapter Five

The sea witch's Lacuna was some distance from Kyra's home, closer to where she'd pulled Nicholas from the shipwreck. She hadn't brought much with her except some seaweed and crab to eat on the journey – and her best weapons.

The sea witch lived behind a set of roaring whirlpools that towered up from the seabed. They raged around her as Kyra navigated them. Down below was a peat bog – a stretch of warm, bubbling mud on the sea floor. She'd be keeping her distance from *that*.

Soon the peat bog made way for a gathering of polyps and seaweed, the polyps coiling like snakes and worms, rising up and reaching out, trying to grab at Kyra's tail.

"Get away," Kyra hissed, rising up higher into the sea.

There were remnants of things the polyps had grabbed before scattered about the sand: the bones of dead humans who had died at sea, sunken chests lost in shipwrecks, animal and fish skeletons. Leaving the death and decay behind her, Kyra finally arrived at the sea witch's home. The entrance was a passageway built of ruined shipwrecks, each separate piece jutting up at an angle. The whole thing led into the mouth of a cave.

Two fat water snakes with snapping jaws were circling the entrance. Those bottom-feeders must have been well fed – they were larger than any sea snake Kyra had seen before. Alongside them, a Mer male swam in a circle in front of the entrance. He was holding a trident similar to her father's, and the criss-crossing scales on his tail formed pale-blue triangles. He had distinctive spikes running along his jawline and across his shoulders – and she realised she recognised him.

"Fisk?" she said, as she swam closer.

Fisk stopped swimming his route and turned. “Kyra? What are you doing here?”

Fisk had once worked as one of the wardens with her father. He’d often visited their cave when Pearl and Kyra were children, bringing them seaweed balls and fresh crab, telling them stories. Several years ago, he’d been exiled when he sought help from the sea witch about a personal problem he’d never disclosed.

“I came to see the sea witch,” Kyra explained.

“You shouldn’t be here. Does your father know?”

“I told him I was planning on coming, yes. Pearl’s dead,” she said flatly. “And I’m here to end the one who did it, whether he likes it or not.”

“Your little sister?” Fisk lowered his trident, his mouth half-open, before his expression morphed to one of anger. “Who was responsible?”

“A human prince.”

Fisk scowled, blowing a stream of bubbles through his nose. “I’m very sorry to hear it.”

“You didn’t see her come here?” asked Kyra.

“No,” said Fisk, frowning. “Someone else must have been on duty that day, maybe one of the girls.”

“Will you let me pass?”

Fisk’s grip on his trident tightened, and his expression darkened. “You shouldn’t be here, Kyra. You were good children, both of you.” He glanced over his shoulder and lowered his voice, as if he expected the witch to be there, listening. “Your sister didn’t deserve to die. Do you really want to go down the same path, making a deal with the sea witch, if it got Pearl killed? You shouldn’t trifle with dark magic. I’ve learned that myself. It got me exiled, and I regret it every day.”

“I don’t care,” said Kyra.

“You don’t care at all? You’re so quick to come here, wanting to make a deal, even though it got your sister killed? She wouldn’t want this for you. If she were still here—”

“She isn’t here, and I don’t care what happens to me!” Kyra ground out. “I don’t care if I live or die, as long as Rhydian is dead.” The words came out hollow, deadpan, but they were the truth. In the moons after Pearl’s death, she’d realised she didn’t care about herself or what happened to her – if she died, maybe she’d even get to see Pearl again, join her as froth on the waves, and ideally, tell her she’d dealt with Rhydian and made him pay.

Fisk gave a heavy sigh. “Go home, Kyra, please.”

“If you don’t let me pass, I’ll wait somewhere and come back when someone takes over from you.”

He frowned. “Fine, you do that. I’m not going to be responsible for *your* downfall – I already feel partly responsible for Pearl’s. If I’d been here, maybe I could have…” He trailed off, his face squeezing into an expression of pain.

She’d thought about that herself: how different things might be, if she could have talked her sister out of her plans. There had been no talking to her. And right now, Kyra felt the same way. No one would stop her from going up there and killing the prince.

She waited a full day before someone took over from Fisk – he couldn’t be there all the time. He had to rest, and he probably had other duties to carry out for the sea witch besides. She’d slept in a cave nearby. When she returned, a girl was at the entrance instead. She was plucking leaves from a red plant as she hovered there in the water, looking bored, the water snakes circling the entrance behind her. She had black hair and tiny ear-fins, and her scales tracked a unique zig-zag path on her cheek, like a constellation of stars. A green necklace hung between her breasts. When Kyra approached and explained why she was here, the girl didn’t care – not like Fisk had. In fact, she gave a smirk when Kyra said she wanted to kill a human prince.

“Levina can help you,” she said. She muttered some inaudible words to the water snakes. They moved off, lurking either side of the entrance in the shadows instead. “I’m Narissa. Follow me.”

Kyra made her way through the passage behind Narissa. They followed the tunnelling pathways of craggy rock until they reached a wide, open space with sharp stalactites hanging down from the ceiling.

The sea witch was there, sitting at a colossal rock shaped into a table, with a matching seat. A huge ornate mirror was placed on the table in front of her, along with a gathering of bottles and vials. A black circlet encased the front of her head, and alongside her black hair, dark-green tentacles swayed like fingers. Her tail was long, sleek and green, the tip torn.

“Levina?” said Narissa. “There’s a Mer woman here to see you – said something about killing a prince.”

When the sea witch turned, Kyra was surprised to see how lovely her face was. Olive-green, with slightly darker scales around her eyes and

forehead, and a slash of dark lip stain.

She scowled, not looking quite so lovely anymore. “Who are you?” she demanded, setting down a pot of orange cream. She lifted her hand, and a white staff flew from somewhere in the darkness, rushing at her on a sudden current. “What do you know of the prince?”

Kyra didn’t understand her hostility. “Not much, except my sister loved him, and now she’s dead. I’m here to make a contract with you.”

Levina’s expression relaxed, and she lowered the staff.

“So it’s true,” said Kyra. “You do have powers of air and sea.”

“You don’t, I take it?”

Kyra didn’t answer.

The witch pointed her staff forwards. It was made of clear calcite, with a claw-like top clutching a moon-white orb. “You’re Pearl’s sister?”

“Yes.”

“Ah.” The sea witch rose up from the stone seat. She was a large Mer – twice Kyra’s size – even though her body was slim. “It all makes sense. I expected you to come to me eventually.”

“Did you?” Kyra asked, and glanced around the cave. There were more furnishings fashioned from rock and crystal: countertops holding bottles and potions, glass jars, scattered crystals. Fish bones were stuck to the walls. The cave branched off into more passageways to the left and right. Narissa was quiet in the gloomy entrance to the tunnel they’d left behind.

“It was just a matter of time,” said the sea witch.

“I’ll get right to the point. My sister always praised the sea witch—”

“It’s Levina, dear, none of this ‘sea witch’ nonsense,” she interrupted, with a wave of her webbed hand. “I’m proud of who I am, but ‘sea witch’ is a nickname your foolish king gave to me when he exiled me. I don’t find it favourable.”

“Levina, then. You were able to make Pearl human. I want you to do the same for me.”

“Your sister spoke about you often,” said Levina, swimming the short distance to assess her. She circled her, sizing her up. “She said you didn’t care much for the human world.”

Nicholas’s face surfaced in her mind, how she’d saved him, and she shoved it down. “I don’t.”

“Yet you want to become one of them?”

“Anything to kill the prince. He took my sister from me.”

Levina came face-to-face with her, her dark lips pursed. “Your sister loved the world above – she became quite at home in the Kingdom of Lumen. My spell was a blessing for her. You – you’re more at home down here. Are you certain you want this?”

“I’m certain.”

“She also said you once trained to be a warden, a defender of Mer royalty,” Levina went on. “You know how to fight?”

“Yes.”

“Ah, what a change for you! To decide to kill royalty, rather than defend it. Still, it won’t be easy, to kill a prince. Some might say a fool’s errand.” Levina’s lips twisted in amusement, and behind Kyra, Narissa giggled.

“Is this funny to you both?” Kyra demanded.

“Yes,” said Narissa, laughing some more. The sound faded. “Are you sure you want to let her do this, mistress?”

Levina waved a hand at Narissa dismissively. “It’s fine, Narissa. The prince isn’t useful to me, is he? It won’t be as easy as you believe it to be,” Levina said to Kyra, smirking. “That’s all.”

“I don’t care. However long it takes, and however difficult, he *will* pay for what happened to Pearl.”

Levina was silent for a moment, pressing her painted fingernails to her scaled chin. “Interesting. There will be a price to pay. You know this.”

“I’ve already lost my sister. My father is broken – he spends most of his time distracting himself with his work. What else could there be for me to lose?”

The sea witch turned to her, and this time her smile was a full-blown grin, showing teeth – several of which were pointed enough to slice flesh. She ran her tongue over them. There was a split down the centre of her tongue, like one of her snakes.

“Your sister might have told you – any magic I use requires a binding contract between us,” said Levina.

“I’m aware. Name your price, and I’ll gladly pay it.”

“Your freedom, should you fail,” Levina whispered.

“Excuse me?”

“I’ll make you the potions required to change forms, and you can go to the human world to kill the prince. I’ll give you six moons. If you haven’t killed him by then, you will return to the Mer kingdom and become one of

my girls – you'll work for me, here in the Lacuna, for good. I will take a piece of your soul, and you will obey me forever."

The rumours Kyra had heard were true. Levina must control the giant sea serpent using part of its soul, too, as well as the girls who worked for her. She glanced at Narissa, who had a faint smile on her face, and her arms crossed. That was why they could never leave her employ. Kyra didn't doubt she probably used the threat of taking the rest of their soul, and leaving them dead, to keep them loyal.

"If the prince *does* die by your hand," the witch continued, "and that part is important, it must be you and you alone – then I'll grant you a boon. So long as you aren't seen killing him by anyone, no one from the surface will remember you. Their minds will haze over, and no one will suspect you. You can have your freedom and do what you wish with it. You won't have to worry about a thing."

"You wouldn't expect me to work for you, if I succeeded in killing the prince?" Kyra asked.

"No." Levina smirked. "Failure has a price, and you'll pay it for wasting my time. If you fulfil the contract, it is done, and will disintegrate."

Kyra frowned, raking a hand through her hair. "I don't see how this benefits you. Do you need more girls, if I fail? I heard you had dozens." She gestured at Narissa.

"I'm always in need of more," the sea witch said, and her voice was low and dangerous. "A final point. Should *you* die, or me, the contract is ended. Accept the price and we'll begin – or you can turn around and leave, go back to your father, and forget we had this conversation."

Your father. Her words were the sharp sting of a jellyfish. If Kyra did this, either way, she'd be giving up Einar too. They hadn't exactly parted on the warmest terms. Kyra cared about him; she didn't want that to be their last interaction. But this was Kyra's chance to avenge Pearl.

"I'll do it," Kyra told her.

"Very well," said Levina. "Follow me. Narissa, go back to the entrance."

"Yes, mistress," said Narissa. She cast a glance at Kyra with her ice-blue eyes before she swam from the cave.

"She's one of my best girls, always overachieving," said Levina, "though she has the tendency to be… disloyal at times. I keep her close, as you do your enemies. Perhaps you'll spend more time with her one day."

She laughed. “The wretched girl has a voice blessed by the Sea Mother, though – always singing. I detest singing.”

“Can we get on with it?” Kyra said.

Grasping her staff, Levina swam down the passage leading off to the right, and Kyra followed her, her tail beating a path of bubbles behind her. The tunnel was empty – no carved furnishings to be found here – and bent to the left, until they were swimming into a new cavern, with a taller ceiling and purple fish flitting in and out of the crevices. This cavern was filled with light – jellyfish holding a reddish glow floated around the ceiling, and glowing sea stars and worms were stamped across the sides of the cave.

They swam through tunnels and caverns for a long time, and Levina guided her upwards. Eventually, Kyra found herself breaking the surface of the water, in an area of the cavern where there was a pocket of air. It was similar to the caverns where Mer children learned to read and write – except those were usually closer to the surface, on some long-forgotten island, and with more room besides. This space was tight, claustrophobic, and the walls here had been finely carved into shelves and were stacked with scrolls in sealed jars, long quill-tip pens and bottled squid ink.

Levina produced a scroll and quill, beginning to scribble and mutter under her breath, using one of the rock-shelves as a work surface. Wisps of dark-purple light flew around her claws and webbed hands as she worked with the squid ink, illuminating the paper, becoming increasingly brighter. A heavy feeling fell over Kyra, as if the dark magic was permeating the air around them and seeping into her scales.

When Levina was done with the contract, the purple light faded somewhat, and she held out the quill and scroll for Kyra.

“Sign your name.”

Taking a deep breath, Kyra took the quill and dipped it into the ink. A few droplets dribbled into the water. She didn’t hesitate, and scrawled her name at the bottom of the scroll.

With a toothy smile, Levina snatched the scroll from her, rolled it up, and stuffed it back into the jar, which she sealed and kept hold of. “Come,” she ordered. “The transformation can start now.”

They ventured back into the tunnel system – down, down, down in the gloom, until they reached the light-filled cavern again.

Levina made her way to a huge stone opening in the centre of the cavern. It was shining with a strange purple flame dancing like flower

petals, even underwater. Levina's spellwork, Kyra assumed. There were stone furnishings hidden around the cave, cluttered with potion bottles and shells.

Now they were here, the crawling feeling on the back of Kyra's neck was reminding her of what she was about to do. Her fins and scales would recede into smooth skin. Kyra's tail would split apart. She wouldn't have webbed hands, or claws, anymore. She would be smooth as a fish egg, soft. Fragile.

"You're in luck," said Levina, as she gathered up a collection of items from around the room – herbs, pastes, sea stars, bones. "An opportunity has come up at the Whitecliff Estate that will benefit you."

"That's where he's marrying *her*," Kyra hissed. "The other woman. The one he betrayed Pearl for."

"His new bride-to-be, yes," said Levina. "The prince is a tormented fool with mother issues. I don't care to get into the mental processes behind how he chooses his lovers." She floated over and touched Kyra's shoulder, claws pressing into her arm. "Now listen. The prince's new love is in need of another handmaiden to wait on her."

Kyra recoiled, wrinkling her nose. "You want me to work for the prince's new lover?"

"It's your best chance to get close to the prince."

"And how do you know about this, exactly?"

"Look around, child." She removed her hand from Kyra's arm and waved it around the room, the luminescent stars and creatures lighting up the scales dappling her skin. Openings had been carved into one side of the cave, forming a horizontal storage area. There were shining oyster shells lined up in every gap – each one a shimmery, light purple. "This is a place of spellwork. The human world is full of useful resources. I have something of an interest in the estate myself."

"What interest would you have in that place?"

Levina lifted a shoulder. "I send my girls there occasionally. There are many fine ingredients for spells to be found in the human world. Flowers, herbs, unique minerals and crystals, among other things."

She left Kyra's side, plucking a shell from the crevices of the cave, the tentacles on her head swirling as she moved. "Each shell here contains a record of my spellwork, in my own voice. It's enchanted to recite exactly

what I need.” Her eyes were shining as she looked at the shells, pride brimming on her face.

Kyra said nothing.

“You will need another spell when you get to the estate,” she continued. “One to ensure you get the job as the bride-to-be’s handmaiden. Her Aunt Ruth is to conduct the interviews – that means a formal process where they question you to decide if you’re fit for the job,” Levina explained, plucking a dark-pink shell from the shelf. “It will be simple – you can use this powder infused with siren song. Blow it into her face.”

Kyra nodded. She’d come across these types of powders – they were often used when travelling through dangerous, shark-infested waters. Some of the merchants she guarded provided her with them, in case they’d be helpful on long journeys; she’d never had to use any before. Since the enchantment came from the mouths of sirens themselves, it wasn’t forbidden like the other magic Levina practised. Instead, it was considered one of the Sea Mother’s blessings.

“When she breathes it in, she will be more relaxed, and more taken with you,” Levina continued, “and so long as you do well in her interview, the job should be yours.”

“I’m aware of how it works,” said Kyra.

“Good. Come,” said Levina. “We can begin your transformation.”

Chapter Six

Levina made her curl into the hollow in the centre of the cave. She'd placed things beneath her, on top of her: herbs, pastes, human bones. Kyra nestled there like a child, her tail tucked around her. She closed her eyes and thought of her sister, imagining her curled in her cave, stringing beads into bracelets and making necklaces from seashells to sell to merchants – one of her favourite activities.

"This will hurt," said Levina. "It will be the worst pain you've endured. With each transformation, the pain will lessen. I will give you some potions so you can transform again if needed once you're on land. I'm still perfecting this spell – so if you're splashed with saltwater while in your human form, you'll become Mer again. You don't have to worry about rain, or bathing in the estate. Those won't have the same effect."

Kyra jerked a nod, and clamped her teeth over her lips.

Levina started with a wave of her staff, and a burst of white-blue light struck Kyra and the hollow she was nestled in – and the pain began.

It was excruciating. Kyra screamed, curling in on herself. It was like she was being clawed repeatedly, over and over, across every inch of her skin. Parts of herself were shrinking. Her ear-fins were pressing into the sides of her skull. All the fins across her arms pushed at her, burrowing their way inside. Kyra's tail felt like it was being seared in two by boiling water and a knife.

It went on, and on, and on. And in one horrible moment Kyra even questioned why she was doing this. She tried to speak, to get the witch to stop. Kyra didn't need to avenge her sister – what was she *thinking*? Kyra wanted to go home, to Einar. She wanted to break the surface and see a group of dolphins leaping and swimming for the horizon as the sun set. Kyra wanted the pain to be over.

It was endless.

Levina loomed over her – there was someone else too, a shadowy figure beside her. Kyra was in such agony she could barely make out the words Levina spoke.

"… take her to Aylin… transformation… complete soon…"

Webbed hands grasped her shoulders and hauled her up, and she cried out, squeezing her eyes shut as pain lanced through her fin, tearing down the middle. She was pulled, dragged away from Levina's caverns. The sea rushed around her, and fresh pain scored through her body.

As she was lifted through the sea, she faded into blackness.

When she woke, she was lying cheek-down in a patch of white sand, grains sticking to the side of her face. Immediately, things felt *wrong*. Her body… it was smooth against the sand, as if her scales had been sheared off. She lifted her hand to touch her cheek, groggy as she attempted to open her eyes. When Kyra's fingers reached her cheeks, she jerked back, eyes snapping open. Her claws were gone, as were the webbed segments between her fingers. Instead, short pink nails topped off long, pale fingers with wrinkly middles. When she bent them, the wrinkles smoothed out.

Kyra jerked back in the sand, tried to raise herself up, and promptly toppled over. Hauling herself up, she sat spread-eagled and stared at the lower half of her body.

Her tail was gone. In its place were two long, fleshy legs, and feet with stubby toes. She flexed them and shrieked, disgusted by the movement. Her long dark hair was dry against her back – an unnatural feeling, when she was used to it flowing around her in the water. She didn't dare look down at her chest and see how that differed. She imagined the lovely patchwork of green-blue scales would be gone, replaced by ghastly pale-pink flesh.

"Ah, you're awake," came a voice.

Kyra glanced up. A young woman was standing on the sand before her: human, with flame-red hair tied at the nape of her neck and rosy cheeks.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Don't look so startled. I'm one of Levina's girls," said the woman. "I have a shack over there, in another cove." She jerked a finger over her left shoulder. "The Mer girl who brought you to the surface came to fetch me."

"Why?"

“I work at the estate for Levina sometimes, collecting things for spells,” she explained, and grinned. “Gardener.”

“You went through this… change too?”

“You get used to it. Here.” She flung some fabric that had been folded over her arm at Kyra. “Put that on. We need to get you to the estate soon to be interviewed.”

“You know about that?”

“The other girl told me.”

The girl – Aylin, she learned – helped Kyra gingerly to her feet, and instructed her in how to dress. Kyra had never even contemplated putting so much *fabric* on her body before – fabric was for ship sails, not adorning the body. The only use for clothing was for protection from the elements or predators and enemies. She couldn’t grasp why humans adorned themselves in this way, but she knew they did – so she had to do it as well. Her new dress was made of a light, creamy fabric, with frills around the neckline and shoulders.

“Tell them you’re not from the Kingdom of Lumen. You’re from overseas – from the Kingdom of Orinthia,” Aylin said, when she was dressed. “It’s far enough away. You can put any gaps in your knowledge down to being new here.”

“Orinthia,” Kyra repeated.

“Yes. Now, I’ll show you how to walk.”

There was plenty of falling and stumbling before Kyra grasped how to use her legs – mostly. She tried to run; her legs became tangled beneath her and she crashed to the sand. She hadn’t realised how much of a hindrance this human body would be.

It would take time to become stronger here. She grumbled in frustration.

“Good enough,” said Aylin, glancing at the sun in the sky. “Come on, we need to go.”

Aylin pressed something into Kyra’s hands as they left the white, sandy beach – a pouch made of a golden cotton fabric, attached to a long loop-link chain. When Kyra squeezed it gently, she felt something hard and slightly rounded inside.

“You’ll want to wear that cross-body bag. The siren-song powder is inside,” Aylin explained. “The other girl said you’d know what to do with it during your interview.”

“I remember.”

“There’s extra potion in there, too. For transforming again, if you need to. Be careful – it’s not infinite. I doubt Levina will make you more.”

A dry path led away from the water, further onto land, and Aylin led them down it, Kyra hooking the bag across her body as she went, so it rested on her shoulder. She glanced back at the glittering, azure sea, the summer sunshine sparkling off the waves as they rolled back and forth. She longed to dive back in – already the sun was making her scalp feel warm and uncomfortable, and her dry hair felt awful in the tight coil Aylin had made on her head.

They followed the bright, beaten track, and the shushing of the waves followed them. The track snaked around steep ivory cliffs and soon they were emerging onto a wider road, leading to a small black gate with gold tips. A short, stone wall ran down the left side of the cliff, covered in rose bushes, and the sea sprawled out behind it. Kyra’s breath caught. She had never seen the sea from such an angle, with beautiful flowers in the foreground and the blue, cloudless sky stretching to the horizon.

“This way,” said Aylin, tugging on her arm.

A man in smart midnight clothing was on the other side of the black gate, smoking. His hair was messy, ruffled, and the deep brown of his eyes shone in the sun. There was a softness there, in the gentle curve of his cheek and chin.

Nicholas.

Kyra had to shake off her shock, even as her heart jumped. For a short time, caught up in the process of the ritual and becoming human, she’d forgotten she would see him here. Did he recognise her? Her heart was beating furiously at the base of her throat. He’d barely reacted, so surely he didn’t remember her saving him? He lifted an eyebrow at her. Was it because she was staring, or did he know?

“Would you put the cigarette out and let me in, please, Nicholas?” Aylin said sweetly. “I’ve brought Kyra here for an interview with Ruth. She’s a friend of mine from Orinthia, applying for the handmaiden job.”

Nicholas stubbed out the cigarette on the stone wall and began to open the gate for them. Kyra felt cold, analysing his every movement to see if he recognised her. She couldn’t tell.

Once the gate had screeched open, Aylin stepped inside, and Kyra followed. She thought she’d done well with her legs thus far, but when Nicholas smiled at her, her insides fluttered and – disarmed – she stumbled

through the gap, losing her footing. She blamed the ridiculous *shoes* Aylin had made her wear: tight and restrictive.

Nicholas touched her elbow, catching her as she almost fell into his chest. Righting herself, she looked up into his eyes. Thick black lashes, soft brows, smooth skin – except his jaw, which was scattered with finely trimmed hairs. She now understood why her sister had wanted the prince. She could look at his face endlessly.

A spark of something lit his expression – was that recognition? Had she imagined it?

"Have I… seen you somewhere before?" he asked her. His fingertips still held her elbow. Her skin there was warm, the feeling spreading.

Kyra shook her head. "No, I… I don't think so. I'm from Orinthia. I've never been to this kingdom before."

"I see. You must have a familiar face. Well, we don't want you falling before you get your chance," he said softly, and smiled at her. He removed his hand.

My chance? For a wild moment, she thought he could see through her – that he knew of her plans to kill Rhydian. She gave a shaky laugh when she realised he was referring to the interview with Ruth. She needed to get a hold of herself. She was a strong Mer female, and yet she became a dithering idiot around him.

"Yes," she said, trying to keep her voice even. "Thank you."

"I'm Nicholas Turner," he said. He bowed low and planted his lips on the back of her hand.

The sensation sent ripples up her arms, through every fibre of her being. Human lips were so *soft*. The lips of some Mer could be coarse, due to the tiny scales. She wasn't sure if she liked it – it was strange.

"I'm Kyra," she said. The Mer didn't bother using two names and she glanced at Aylin.

"Kyra Hale," Aylin added.

"If you have things to do in the gardens, Aylin, I don't mind escorting Ms Hale to Ruth," Nicholas offered. "I was on my way back inside."

"Oh," said Aylin, sounding uncertain. They hadn't planned for this. "If Kyra doesn't mind…?"

"I don't," said Kyra. She didn't need to be coddled, not least by one of Levina's girls; she knew enough to get by here, until she had her opportunity to get rid of Rhydian.

“Very well.” Aylin smoothed her dress and adjusted her hair at the base of her neck before bidding them goodbye and leaving through the gate.

“Shall we?” said Nicholas, and he extended his arm to Kyra.

After a brief hesitation, she threaded her arm through his. “Yes,” she said.

“Are you nervous for the interview?” he said as they passed into a shaded passageway running around the side of the building, with columns and flowers in rows at the edges.

“I don’t think so. Should I be?” Perhaps interviews were something humans tied themselves in knots about?

“No – but some people get nervous,” he said. “It’s good, if you aren’t. You must be confident.”

She lifted a brow. “Have you had many interviews?”

He snorted. “No. I’m the son of a duke.” He shrugged, his smile fading. “I’ve never needed to be interviewed for a job. I’m friendly with lots of the servants here, and they detest them.”

Kyra remembered the way Rhydian had spoken about the servants at the estate. He’d looked down on them, mocked them. “Is it usual for a duke to befriend servants?” she asked.

“I do,” he said. “My father disapproves.”

Kyra didn’t speak again, although she sensed Nicholas expected her to – perhaps to ask about his father. When she didn’t, he remained silent. They passed several tall windows overlooking the sea, but the reflections prevented her from seeing inside the estate. The passage connected to a wide garden in full bloom, filled with square-shaped greenery – the green here was so *vivid* – and pure white flowers. A stone fountain sat at the centre, spewing forth water into a circular pool below.

“Quite beautiful, isn’t it?” Nicholas said.

“It… it is,” she said. She hadn’t expected the estate to be so lovely, on the inside. She could see why Pearl had loved it here.

“It’s through here,” said Nicholas.

A path led down another side wall, away from the garden, and opened out suddenly onto what was clearly an entrance.

This must be the front of the estate. Another fountain, even larger than the one they’d just seen, squatted in the midst of a diamond-shaped patch of grass, pouring jets of water into the air. The grassy space was dotted with flower beds teeming with red, yellow and pink blooms. The estate itself

stretched wide, every inch carved with columns and balconies, the windows sparkling and reflecting the sky. It looked so *clean*, so polished – not a hairline crack was visible, not a smudge of grime. The front door was black and glossy, framed by ornate goldwork depicting a long-haired woman pouring golden liquid either side of the door.

"There you are," said Nicholas. "If you go through those doors and tell them why you're here, someone will take you to Ruth. It's still early, so they haven't even opened the front gates yet." He motioned across to the area beyond the fountain where, in the distance, golden gates were shining in the sun, ringing the estate.

After their walk, she was feeling uncomfortable in her dress. She was hot, and liquid was springing across her forehead, trickling down her back. She raised a hand to her head, shoving aside a strand of her hair and letting a huff escape her.

"Here, I have a handkerchief," said Nicholas, and he reached into the breast pocket of his jacket. He held the handkerchief out to her, and nodded at her forehead. "I imagine you'd rather not be soaked for your interview."

"Thank you," Kyra said, and took the handkerchief, dabbing it against her brow. "Aren't you going inside?"

"I am. I'll be honest with you, I'm in no hurry. Catarina asked me to wake Rhydian as they were supposed to have a morning ride together an hour ago, and she bumped into me in the hall." He rolled his eyes. "He has a hangover. I'd rather have another cigarette than face *that*. Someone else can wake him."

"I… see." Kyra didn't know what a hangover was, but a mass of emotions churned in her chest. *Rhydian.* The prince didn't deserve to have his first name spoken so casually, like he hadn't robbed her sister of *her* life. He didn't deserve to live at all. If a hangover were fatal, she wouldn't mind – except it would rob her of the pleasure of carrying out the task herself.

"Good luck with your interview," said Nicholas. "Maybe I'll see you around, if you get the job?"

"Perhaps," she said.

Turning, Kyra made her way to the doors.

Chapter Seven

As soon as Kyra approached, the doors swung open smoothly, without her having to lift so much as a finger. Confused, she wondered if human doors opened themselves until two men in silver-plated armour with red fabric draped over the top appeared. They nodded at her, ushering her inside a huge entrance hall, with gleaming polished floors that reflected a crystalline lamp on the ceiling. The door closed with a thud that echoed around the vast space.

A young woman wearing a green cotton dress and white bonnet appeared and said, “Are you here for the interview?”

“Yes?” said Kyra.

“Follow me. You’re right on time.”

A huge staircase was positioned in the middle of the room, spilling up to a second floor and bordered in gold railings. The ceiling was high and etched with carvings of the same goddess who was shown on the front doors, this time surrounded by flowers and streams of sunlight. Unlit gold lamps were dotted about the walls. In many ways, it was similar to the Mer palace: they liked ornamentation too. In other ways it was foreign. There were no open windows for fish to spill inside, chasing the current. No coral hugged the side-lines, no seaweed waved at her from the darker corners.

The woman led her to a door by the side of the staircase. They passed through a corridor with a red carpet running up the centre. The stone walls were laced with goldwork and embossed with swirling patterns. Passing through another door, Kyra was shown into a bright room filled with sunlight. Floor-to-ceiling windows filled the far wall, with a view out across the cliffs and over the glittering sea. Beige curtains hung by the windows, pulled back with silvery ropes, and several squashy white seats were

positioned around a low, glass table dotted with books. A platter had been laid out with a jug of water and several goblets.

The woman gestured to the platter. There were little white squares, too – Kyra wasn't sure what they were – and fruits.

"Help yourself to some sandwiches while you wait," said the woman. "I'll fetch Lady Ruth."

Kyra nodded – although she had no intention of eating the human food right now – and the woman left.

She exhaled, glad for a moment to herself. Her shoulders were tense with the effort of keeping up this pretence that she was human, and entirely comfortable in her body. She pulled at her dress, wriggling, trying to make herself feel more at home in the heavy fabric.

She didn't have to wait long for Ruth to arrive. The woman bustled in several minutes later.

Ruth was a buxom woman, and much shorter than Kyra, but held herself with her chin tipped in the air. She wore a ruffled dark-purple dress spilling to the ground in an assortment of waves and twists. The shape looked unnatural to Kyra; there must be something underneath it, to give it that form. Her eyes were blue and piercing. Kyra worked hard not to frown, her shoulders tense at the prospect of interacting with this woman.

"Let me take a look at you." Ruth approached her, cupping her arms, and Kyra felt the ridges of her fingernails digging in. Human skin was *far* too soft and not defensive enough for her liking. She held still, keeping her back straight, even though she wanted to fight her off. "Hmm," Ruth muttered. "You're not meek, it seems. Sit down. Let me get a sandwich and we'll talk. I've seen one girl before you and wasn't mightily impressed – she spilled water all over the place. Catarina won't abide clumsiness."

Kyra lifted a brow. When Ruth's back was turned, she produced the vial with the siren-song powder, uncorking it carefully and tipping the powder into her hands. It was pink and glittered faintly like gems, but felt like air in her hands. She moved to stand behind Ruth, holding her breath.

"So, let's start with…" Ruth turned, the sandwich in her hand encased in a handkerchief. Kyra blew the powder right into her face.

Ruth became wide-eyed, then her brows pulled together in rage, but as the powder permeated her nostrils, eyes and mouth, her expression relaxed. Her eyebrows twitched, blue eyes glazing over, becoming less stern. She looked like she was about to fall asleep.

The cloud of pink dust cleared. Kyra tucked the vial back into her bag and stepped back.

“I…” Ruth swayed. She blinked rapidly, and steadied herself. “Excuse me, dear, I seem to have forgotten myself. I must have had one too many glasses of wine last night!” She laughed, her fingers flying to her neckline and pawing at a necklace of glittering diamonds at her throat. She took a delicate bite of her sandwich, wrinkled her nose, then threw it in a nearby container.

“Why don’t you sit down?” Kyra took Ruth’s elbow and steered her gently across the room.

Ruth took to one of the seats. Her voice sounded slower when she spoke again. “This is an informal discussion, to see if you’d be a good candidate to work here.”

Kyra sat down, even though it felt unnatural not to have her tail tucked beneath her. These legs chafed together, and with the warm weather outside, it was horrible. How did humans cope with their skin so *warm* all the time, especially whilst wearing clothing?

“Your name?” Ruth said. Her eyelids fluttered. Good. The powder must be working its magic, relaxing her.

“I’m Kyra… Kyra Hale. From the Kingdom of Orinthia,” she added, hoping there wouldn’t be too many questions. “A remote village.” That should be enough to hide any mistakes she’d make here, even if people *were* familiar with Orinthia.

“Orinthia? It’s all snow and ice, isn’t it?” Ruth shuddered. “Catarina has never visited. She’s frightened of the rumours of a sorceress who turns men into ice trolls with frozen hearts. She’s often a reluctant traveller. She prefers her home comforts here in Lumen.”

“I see.”

“I’ve told her that must change if she’s to marry into the Harcourt royal family. She’ll need to be part of the prince’s royal duties, and that includes international relations. Something you’ll need to become accustomed to, as well.”

“Of course,” Kyra answered, her jaw hard. Her *sister* should be travelling with the prince, not this Catarina – but she needed to win Ruth over, so she spun out an assumption. “From what I’ve heard of Catarina, she’s very… charismatic. I don’t imagine she’ll have a problem with international relations.”

“You’re right,” said Ruth, smiling faintly. She leaned back. “You’ll do well as her handmaiden, if you think so highly of her already.”

“Is that so?”

“Catarina is particular. Knowing her well – and knowing what she likes and dislikes – will be key. And you must know how to be tactful, careful. She’s quite… volatile. And she takes her own protection seriously. She can be anxious. Do you have any previous experience handling conflict?”

“Yes,” said Kyra. She decided to bend the truth of her own life. “I can do more than a typical handmaiden. I’ve been a merchant’s guard. I’ve dealt with plenty of disputes. I can fight, too.”

“I see. Perhaps you can show Catarina your skills. You know…” Ruth leaned over, beckoning for Kyra to do the same, as though the very walls were listening, and smiled at her. Her words were almost slurred when she spoke. “The other girl I interviewed, she became rather unsettled after I mentioned conflict. She said she’d changed her mind about wanting to be a handmaiden. She had no backbone, the silly child!”

“I won’t change my mind,” Kyra reassured her. She was finding Ruth deeply unpleasant – were all humans like this? “I can handle myself, and I want to work here,” she forced out.

“Indeed?” Ruth’s smile spread further over her face, stretching out her wrinkles. She yawned sleepily. “And why is that?”

Because I want to kill Rhydian. What was a better response? She thought back to her training to become a warden, how people had lied and cheated their way into their positions.

“We all have our place in the world,” she tried. “Leaders – kings, queens, princes, princesses. They keep order, set an example for the people. I’d like to maintain the order. Catarina should feel safe when she becomes the princess.”

Ruth stared at her, glassy-eyed, and Kyra thought she’d churned out the wrong response. Then the woman laughed, a hearty laugh straight from the belly, clutching her stomach and leaning back in her seat.

“Oh, my dear, if you tell Catarina *that*, I’m sure she’ll adore you!” Ruth wiped at her eyes and stood up.

I’m sure she will, Kyra thought bitterly. *It seems these humans enjoy being flattered.* She forced a tight smile.

“She’s difficult, rather spoilt,” Ruth continued. “It was my sister’s fault, I’m afraid, but she only ever wanted to give Catarina a wonderful life. She’s

an only child and was doted on. She still is. I hope you're prepared."

Kyra tipped her chin up, sat up straighter. "I am."

"I think you're perfect, in that case," said Ruth, "and I'm sure Catarina will agree. You'll be good for my niece. And you seem to have a backbone. We need someone who can handle her moods, particularly in the lead-up to the wedding. You know how stressful these things can be."

Kyra really had no idea, but she nodded sweetly as though she understood how human weddings worked. All she knew was that her sister was meant to be the one thinking about a wedding, a future.

Ruth asked Kyra when she could move into the estate. When Kyra told Ruth she could move in right now, the woman's mouth dropped open.

"Don't you have any belongings?" she said. "Family you need to write to, or…?"

Kyra shook her head. "Just this." She touched the bag Aylin had given her, and motioned to the dress she was wearing. "I've already left my home behind. I'm prepared."

"Very well," said Ruth. "I'll find some servant clothing for you to wear. The other servants get together sometimes to visit the local town when they're paid – you can arrange to go with them if you wish." Ruth stood, walked to the door and gestured for Kyra to follow her out. "I'll take you upstairs now. Meredith should be there – Catarina's other handmaiden. You'll be working together closely, and you'll live together in the servant quarters."

"And Catarina?" Kyra said carefully. "Where is she? Will I meet her today?"

Ruth sighed, still glassy-eyed. "She's supposed to be on a ride with Rhydian this morning. He overslept. I imagine they'll be gone until sometime in the afternoon. She may need you on her return. Meredith can tell you everything you need to know before then."

Ruth escorted her upstairs, the effects of the siren-song powder making her yawn as they went. The floors were a smooth, polished white stone Kyra could see her reflection in. Tall, bright windows ringed with shining borders lined the hall, sunlight pouring in so harshly she couldn't help but squint. She already missed her dim cave at home; this was too ostentatious, bright and glaring. A carved white archway with golden candlesticks either side led them into the servant quarters.

Here, it was more modest. There were no candlesticks or elaborate carvings. Thinner windows were dotted here and there, fringed by silky pale-green curtains and plush seats. Every so often, there was a door, or a decorative vase. Harcourt royal family portraits adorned many of the walls: people in fur-lined tunics and gemstone tiaras and crowns, sitting still and stoic. How egotistical of the humans, to have art of *themselves* on the walls!

They soon came to a set of double doors. Ruth explained that the servants' common area and kitchen were through there, and Meredith would show her these things later. She led her to a single door halfway down the hall.

Ruth knocked, and a woman with a tangle of curly dark hair opened the door.

"Oh, Lady Ruth!" she said breathlessly. "You're here already."

"I didn't need to see anyone else," Ruth answered. "This one is the best candidate for the job." She jerked her thumb at Kyra. "She's ideal. We can forget about the others."

The woman in the doorway looked young. Her eyes were dark like her hair, and her frame was slight, almost childlike, but Kyra would guess she was into her womanhood by the way she spoke and held herself.

"Have you told Catarina, my lady?" the young woman asked.

"I will in good time, Meredith Birdwhistle," Ruth said.

"S-Sorry, Lady Ruth. I didn't expect it to happen so quickly."

Ruth ignored the comment, yawning again. "Kyra will be sharing your quarters with you, so I trust you can get her settled for the time being, and show her what to do?"

"Of course."

"Very good. You can introduce her to Catarina this evening. She has a dinner appointment with the prince and his friends later, after their ride – if he ever surfaces from bed! She needs you this evening for her bath-and-bed routine. And she'll need you both in the coming days for wedding preparations."

Meredith's mouth was hanging open and her hand went slack on the doorknob. "I can't teach her everything by dinnertime, my lady!" She shot Kyra an apologetic look, as though this wasn't her fault.

"You can teach her enough," said Ruth. "Your job isn't exactly difficult, Meredith, it's not arithmetic or astrology! Catarina has lost patience waiting for a replacement. She wanted a handmaiden who could begin at once, and

I’ve found one. Teach her what you know in your downtime – she’ll soon manage.”

“I…” Meredith shrank back, lowering her head. “Yes, Lady Ruth.”

“Good.” Ruth strutted away down the corridor, her shoes click-clacking as she went.

Meredith sighed. “Well, at least she brought you early. Come in.”

Kyra stepped inside and Meredith closed the door behind her.

This was to be her new home – at least for a time. Her insides quailed at the thought. There was no water, no coral, no fish. No dark caves, or bioluminescent fungi gripping the corners of the room. No swarms of jellyfish, or starfish spilling over the floor.

The room was wide, with two large beds positioned either end. A window led out onto a small balcony; the white curtains were gossamer, but she couldn’t quite see outside. A dresser with a tall mirror was pushed against one wall, and there was a long, comfortable seat next to a glass table. A shelving unit sat close by, stuffed with books with shiny spines.

“We’ve been lucky here. Not all servants get rooms as lovely as this one – or have a sea view,” said Meredith.

“There’s a… sea view?” Kyra said slowly.

“Yes, over there.” Meredith gestured at the lace curtains. “Take a look.”

Kyra crossed to the curtains, drawing them back carefully. She slid the doors open and stepped outside, where the salty breeze caught her hair and danced around her face. It felt like a touch of home, and as she stepped further onto the stone balcony, the sparkling sea greeted her. An inlet jutted out to their right, covered in greenery and foliage, the waves splashing against the white cliffs. Her throat felt tight as she looked at her home, so close to her. She wondered if it was perhaps a curse to have it here – to wake up every day and see what she’d given up.

When she turned, Meredith was standing in the doorway, smiling warmly. “I’m Meredith Birdwhistle,” she said, sticking out her hand. “What’s your name?”

“Kyra,” she said. “Kyra Hale.”

She placed her hand in Meredith’s – Aylin had explained hand-shaking – and tried not to wince at the skin-to-skin contact. Meredith’s hands were warm and it wasn’t a feeling she enjoyed. She wanted to dunk her hand in cold water, or better yet, jump into the ocean.

“Nice to meet you. Do you like the sea?” Meredith asked.

“I…” This girl was intuitive, and she was smiling like she was genuinely interested. “I come from overseas, in Orinthia,” she explained. “I’ve… been at sea frequently. I do like it, yes.”

Meredith’s face brightened, and she moved aside to let Kyra step back into the room. Meredith followed her and plopped down on the seat near their bed. “I’ve done *some* travelling with Catarina, but she doesn’t like it much. I want to do more.” She smiled. “What made you come here, to Lumen?”

So many questions. Are all humans like that? At least she isn’t unpleasant and rude, like Ruth.

“Family matters,” Kyra said. She didn’t know where to put her hands while speaking. She was still getting used to the feeling of not having water around her at all times. She tried to emulate Meredith, folding her arms across her body loosely. “I’d rather not talk about it. It wasn’t a… pleasant choice.”

“I understand,” said Meredith, looking down. “I had to leave home, too. My mother is always in pain – she has a sickness – and my father takes care of her.”

Kyra frowned, feeling a spike of cynicism. “And you left them?”

She gave a half-shrug. “I had to. They needed coin. My father can’t work because she needs help all the time. I came here to work for Catarina so I could send money back to them. I’ve been doing it for years. Isn’t that why you took this job? It’s good coin.”

How cruel, for this young girl to have to leave her family behind, just so they could survive. And yet how kind and selfless of her to take care of them for so long. Kyra had been trying to maintain hard edges since she got here – now they softened. Perhaps she shouldn’t judge humans so harshly.

“I’m sorry,” she said gently.

Meredith shook her head and stood up, stretching. “Thank you, but don’t be. I’m grateful I can help them. I do what I can.”

Kyra’s heart twisted. She’d failed to help her sister.

The emotion must have shown on her face, because Meredith said quickly, “Are you alright?”

“I…” Kyra trailed off. “Yes.”

“I don’t mean to pry. I’m sure you came here for your own reasons.” To Kyra’s surprise, Meredith crossed the room, reached out and squeezed her hand. She turned her back on Kyra, looking back at the open doors and the

blue sea. “I love the sea view here, too. It reminds me of home. I come from a tiny village near the coast – on the other side of Lumen, down south – and my dad used to love sitting on the rocks and fishing.” Meredith smiled faintly at the memory. “A lot of the servants don’t even *want* a room with a sea view. Can you imagine?”

“Why not?” said Kyra.

“You’ll soon learn rumours spread around this estate like wildfire,” said Meredith, laughing and shaking her head. “There’s often talk of haunting singing, and a woman with a staff sitting on the rocks, with snakes in her hair. People say it’s the ghost of a sorceress who died near here a long time ago.”

Kyra had to hold back a snort. It must be Levina. She had a head full of black hair and dark-green tentacles, and her Lacuna was close by. She’d exposed herself enough to turn herself into a human myth. She probably liked the idea of the humans in the estate being terrified of her presence.

“I’m not worried about that,” said Kyra.

“Ah, good. The superstition mill around here makes me so *exhausted* sometimes. I’m glad it’s you I’m sharing a room with! Someone with sense!”

Imagine what she’d say if she knew I was a mermaid, Kyra thought, with a faint smile.

“We should get started with work,” said Meredith, beaming back at her. “I’m sure you know a thing or two about cleaning and housekeeping. I’ll go over everything anyway. It’s still early. We’re to meet Catarina this evening, and I want to make sure you’re prepared. She can be… a lot to deal with.”

“I’ve heard,” Kyra muttered.

Chapter Eight

Ruth had made the job of handmaiden sound easy but for Kyra, it wasn't simple. She'd only just mastered walking and now she was being shown how to change sheets, wash clothes, draw a bath, clean and care for rooms and handle the large dresses Catarina wore. Meredith didn't seem to mind her lack of knowledge; she'd trained many handmaidens who had come to work for Catarina in the past. Kyra's uniform consisted of a plain dress and a huge apron with a pocket at the front – she tucked her cross-body bag in there, for safekeeping, as Meredith said the estate's uniform rules were strict.

"Hurry, we always have to be at her rooms before her," Meredith called over her shoulder. They were hurrying down the servant quarters' corridor, towards the main staircase, where they would ascend another floor to find Catarina's room.

The stone steps led them up to another huge hallway. Catarina's room was through a pair of gilded ivory doors at the front of the estate. They creaked as Meredith pushed them open. Kyra felt an awful swooshing sensation inside of her – this woman was her sister's replacement. Rhydian had chosen Catarina over Pearl. She didn't know if she could contain her rage enough to be civil.

Meredith led her into a vast, bright room, calling, "Miss?"

Kyra didn't even notice Catarina at first, she was so stunned by the sheer grandness of the room. Four sets of doors led out onto a balcony with a sweeping view of the green countryside of Lumen sprawling out before the Whitecliff Estate. The rest of the room was all cream and golden edges. The bed was enormous, big enough for at least five people, with a low partition separating it from the other furnishings. Everything was accented with pale

blue – the cushions, a silken blanket thrown across a loveseat, the edges of the mirror on the dressing table.

Catarina was seated on a stool at the dresser, and she turned to face them. She had blush-pink cheeks, a bow to her lips, and blue eyes. Kyra's heart skipped – she had blonde hair like Pearl, but hers was kissed by the sun, rather than ice-white. A collection of jewels and hair ornaments were spread on the dresser in front of her.

"Oh, you're here." Catarina checked herself in the mirror. "You're late, Meredith. I've removed my make-up and I'm ready for my bath to be drawn."

"S-Sorry, miss," said Meredith. "I've been showing Kyra what to do." She gestured at Kyra. "This is Kyra Hale, your new handmaiden."

"Ah." Catarina rose to her feet and set a soft-bristled brush down on the dresser. Her hair fell in soft waves to her shoulders, and she wore a loose, silken pink robe. She looked Kyra up and down and wrinkled her nose. "You're awfully pale. We'll have to make sure you wear some make-up when you're at engagements with me."

"She's from Orinthia," said Meredith, with a tone of defensiveness that Kyra appreciated. "That's her complexion."

Catarina smiled faintly. "That hideous place with the horned ice trolls and the snow that barely sees daylight? No wonder you wanted to leave!" She gave a tinkly laugh. When neither of them replied, she said, "Well? Don't just stand there, go and draw the bath! I've been riding today with Rhydian's siblings, and worked up a sweat. Make sure you put in some bathing oil – the lavender one." She made a shooing motion with her hands, and Meredith motioned for Kyra to follow her to the adjoining room.

How spoilt, Kyra thought, clamping her lips together. *This* was the person the prince had chosen over Pearl?

Drawing a bath was the strangest task – Meredith showed her what to do with the golden taps. Meredith was only partway through dripping in the lavender oil when someone began banging on the door to Catarina's room, shouting wildly.

The words carried straight into the bathroom: "Lady Catarina! Open up, my lady! It's an emergency!"

"What in the *goddess*?" Catarina cried. Kyra and Meredith rushed into the bedroom in time to see her tightening a sash around her waist and opening the door.

A Royal Guard stood outside. He was out of breath, a sheen of sweat coating his forehead and red cheeks. The red fabric across his silver-plated armour was askew.

“My lady!” He gasped for air.

“Whatever is the matter?” Catarina demanded, her voice quivering. She planted her hands on her hips.

The man sucked in a wheezing breath, pressing a hand to his armour. He looked as uncomfortable and dishevelled as Kyra had felt leaving the sea.

“Ruth is dead, my lady!” he choked out.

Chapter Nine

They stood gaping at the guard framed in the doorway. *Dead?* The word rang around Kyra's skull. There wasn't meant to be any death here until *she'd* got her fins on the prince and driven a sharp point through his heart. She wondered if *she'd* accidentally killed Ruth with the siren-song powder. That was impossible. The powder had been the same type given to Kyra by merchants, when she was guarding them – it was the same colour and texture. And it had produced the same effects on Ruth, making her sleepy and more amenable. Something else must have caused Ruth's death. Had she been ill?

"Aunt Ruth?" Catarina was sagging by the door, at risk of falling over, and Meredith rushed over and grabbed her elbows to steady her. "No, she can't be! I saw her earlier! She was fine!"

"Please, Lady Catarina, come with me. Prince Harcourt has asked me to fetch you to the central drawing room—"

"Not until you explain yourself!" Catarina cried. "My aunt *can't* be dead!" Tears spilled onto her cheeks. "What *happened*?"

"She was fine after Kyra's interview…" Meredith said shakily. "I spoke to her."

Kyra moved forwards. She had to take charge. If she could prove she was on Catarina's side, especially during a crisis, it could work in her favour.

"Lady Catarina?" she said softly, and Meredith glanced up in surprise. Kyra moved to Catarina's side and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder whilst Meredith stepped back. "I'm sure if there's been an incident, you'd prefer to hear it from your fiancé, not this man. The prince probably wants to tell you himself. It won't take long to get to the drawing room, I presume?"

The guard, who looked at a loss for words now, jerked a nod.

“We’ll take you,” said Kyra. “Won’t we, Meredith?”

“Of course,” said Meredith.

“I…” Catarina trailed off as fresh tears bloomed at the corners of her eyes. “No, you’re quite right. I need to hear this from Rhydian. Please.” She turned, almost pleading, to Kyra and Meredith, practically crumpling before them.

“Let’s find you something else to wear,” Meredith suggested. “You shouldn’t go like this.” She motioned to Catarina’s bare legs and the loose gown she wore.

“Meredith,” Catarina croaked. “You’re right. Fetch a plain dress and some slippers, please.”

The guard vanished down the corridor, mumbling a grateful thanks to Kyra and Meredith before he left, and they set to work helping Catarina into an emerald-green dress. The fabric was decadent and silken, falling to Catarina’s ankles, and the sleeves were off the shoulder, exposing her delicate neckline.

“Leave it,” Catarina said, when Meredith went to gather her hair at the base of her neck. “My aunt’s dead, I don’t care about my hair! Let’s go, now.”

It wasn’t the circumstance in which Kyra had expected to meet Rhydian. They made their way to the lavish central drawing room of the estate, Catarina walking in solemn silence and allowing them to push open the door for her before leading the way inside. Pale floral fabric was spread across the floor, each seat covered in a matching design. A grand white piano and a harp sat in the corner by the window. Two gold-framed portraits hung on the walls, either side of an enormous mirror: a woman with a jewel-encrusted crown, and a man draped in a red cloak. The king and queen, she assumed.

A man stood with his back to them, by the window. “Rhydian!” Catarina cried, and she hurled herself forwards as Meredith shut the door.

He turned, and she flew into his arms, breaking down into sobs. He clutched her to him, sweeping a hand over her blonde hair. Kyra clenched her fists tightly behind her back. The prince had mussed, sandy-blonde hair, a strong chin, and his skin was smooth. She could see why Pearl had been attracted to him; by human standards, he was pleasing to look at. A shining necklace made of something like seaglass – fragile and breakable – hung at his neck on a black cord, and her throat tightened. Had her sister made him

that? It didn't look like the jewels she'd expect to see a prince wearing – it was too handmade. It was glowing with a white sheen. She stared at it. Moments later the effect was gone, and she thought she might have imagined it. Inside, Kyra felt nothing but ice as the prince's dark-brown eyes assessed her.

"Hush, Cat," he said to his fiancée, squeezing her closer and stroking her hair. "I'm so sorry."

"What happened?" Catarina gurgled, clutching at his shirt.

"The servants went to fetch your aunt some tea and cake. When they returned, she was…" He trailed off, and fresh sobs erupted from Catarina. "I'll spare you the details, my love. They found her in her rooms. I was on my way to speak to her, so I was alerted first."

"And how…? Why…?"

"No one is quite sure. We think it was perhaps a sickness. Something sudden – or something more long-term we weren't aware of. Perhaps stress."

"No, it can't be!" Catarina shook her head wildly, her nails clutching his clothing tighter so the fabric bunched. He tried to pry her hand from the material, but she held fast. "She would have told me if she was unwell!"

"The physician is coming to assess her. It may have been sudden, unexpected."

"She was fine! She was in perfect health – she saw her own personal physician regularly!"

Rhydian finally freed her hands from his shirt, and grasped them in his own. "Sometimes these things happen unexpectedly, Cat." He glanced at the portrait of the man on the wall, then back to his fiancée, and brushed his hand against her cheek, wiping away the tears. "It happened to my father unexpectedly, too. The kingdom was devastated when his heart failed."

"I know…" Catarina blinked away her tears.

"Hush now. I'm here for you."

Catarina buried her face in his clothing and sobbed.

Rhydian smoothed her hair, and when he realised Kyra and Meredith were still standing there listening, he said, "You can wait outside."

In the days ahead, Catarina barely left her room, buried in mounds of blankets and silken pillows, requesting clean handkerchiefs and having food brought to her room. Sometimes her cousins and other relatives visited.

Kyra even got a glimpse of Rhydian's siblings – the princesses, Veronica and Adelia – who stopped by to check on Catarina, jewels adorning their necks, fingers and finely curled hair. She hadn't even seen the prince.

When Kyra wasn't bringing things to Catarina from the kitchens, Meredith was explaining everything they needed to do for the wedding – if it went ahead. Time was moving as slowly as a sea turtle. Kyra didn't want to be here in this bright, glaring place any longer than she had to.

One morning, Meredith had taken some of Catarina's sheets and blankets downstairs to be washed. Kyra lurked around Catarina's room. The place was musty – she hadn't even had the windows or balcony doors open.

"Shall we let in some air?" she suggested, moving to the doors and flinging them open before Catarina could respond.

The young woman didn't answer, just sniffled. Her hair was tangled, her face make-up free. There was a book in her lap; she'd barely touched it.

"Brush my hair, Kyra," Catarina said suddenly. "I haven't the energy."

Kyra crossed to the dresser, bringing the soft-bristled brush over to the bed, wondering why she needed handmaidens for the most basic of tasks – she wasn't a babe. Catarina scooted over, and Kyra sat on the edge of the bed. A hairclip was enmeshed in Catarina's hair at the back, and Kyra used her fingers to try to free it from the snarls. The clip had lots of teeth and floral decorations, so it wasn't the easiest thing to remove. She must have fallen asleep with it in.

"Ouch!" Catarina shrieked, flinching away. "That hurt!" Turning, she batted Kyra's hands away. "Never mind, I'll ask Meredith later. She has a gentler touch. You can pour me a pot of tea instead." She waved at the table on the other side of the room, where a silver tray and green teapot sat – a servant had brought them earlier.

Kyra withheld her sigh and nodded.

Meredith did most of these tasks, so she wasn't used to this. The teapot was hot, and Kyra let out a hiss through her teeth when her fingers caught the sides. There was a strange circular object resting on the teacup, getting in the way of her pouring. She moved it out of the way, poured the tea, and handed the cup to Catarina.

The woman made to take a sip, then stopped when the teacup was halfway to her lips. "There are *leaves* in here! Didn't you use the strainer?"

"The…?"

“The tea strainer, Kyra! They’re tea leaves. Honestly, didn’t Meredith teach you anything? Don’t they drink tea where you come from?” Catarina’s eyes narrowed. “What good is a handmaiden who doesn’t have a domestic bone in her body?”

Kyra bit down on the inside of her cheek to keep her retort inside. Meredith *had* taught her plenty, but there were so many new things for Kyra to learn in the human world, and they hadn’t got around to tea yet. Meredith probably assumed Kyra already knew.

“For goddess’s sake,” Catarina muttered darkly. “I wish Penny’s room was on this floor. She doesn’t let the staff make her tea – I can see why! She makes tea so *perfectly* by herself.”

Kyra didn’t know who Penny was, and she didn’t care to ask. She was saved from Catarina’s snippy mood when someone rapped on the door.

“Leave it,” Catarina said. “I don’t want to see anyone.”

“It might be Meredith,” said Kyra.

“Very well, open it – get rid of them quickly, if it’s someone else.”

It wasn’t Meredith. When Kyra opened the door, Rhydian was standing in the doorway. His sharp chin somehow made him look smug, even when he wasn’t trying. He was still wearing the seaglass necklace that looked like her sister’s handiwork, the seaglass winking in rainbow shades as it caught the light. If only she could stab him right now and wipe the smug look off his face.

“Catarina!” Rhydian called, barging past Kyra without an invitation.

“Go away,” Catarina said. As Kyra closed the door and turned, Catarina yanked a blanket over her head. “I don’t want you to see me this way.”

“Cat, you’ve been in here for *days*.” Rhydian strode to her bed and tugged the blanket down, reaching for her hand. “I’m worried about you, darling. Are you even eating properly? Adelia said she brought you some fruit and you barely touched it.” He shot Kyra a look, as though it were her fault. “Is she eating?”

“We’ve been bringing her food too,” Kyra supplied, working hard to keep the edge from her voice. “Your Highness.”

He turned back to Catarina. “The physician says this isn’t good for you, Cat. You need sunlight – as the goddess intended.”

“The physician says many things,” Catarina replied. “Including that my aunt died of a sickness. Yet she was in perfect health.”

“I told you—”

“Yes, it could have been sudden, like what happened to the king. I know. Your sisters reiterated the point. I don’t believe it. They won’t let me see Ruth’s body. They say it’ll be too much of a shock. Why? I want to see her.”

Rhydian sighed, stroking the back of her hand. “It won’t do you any good to see her, Cat, you’re already in pieces. You need to leave this room, get some fresh air. It’s not good for you. I want you to be healthy for our wedding.”

“The wedding… Surely, we can’t go ahead after…” Catarina trailed off, biting her lip and looking on the verge of fresh tears.

“We can delay it, if that’s what you want. I’d understand. This has been a terrible shock.”

“You’d do that for me?” she breathed.

“Of course. I’m sure your aunt would want you to be happy. She was looking forward to you getting married and she’s been involved in the preparations so far.” He lifted her pale hand to his lips, kissing the tips of her fingers. “Do you need to think about it?”

Catarina was silent for a long while. Eventually, she said, “No. You’re right. Aunt Ruth wouldn’t want us to delay. Everything has been organised already – we’ve been working so hard, and as you say, she helped us… She was looking forward to seeing me in my dress at the fitting. I was talking to Penny about it.” Catarina’s face crumpled, and her eyes filled with tears. “Is this disrespectful to her, going ahead with it? And… her funeral…”

“Ruth contributed to the wedding, paid for your dress. She wouldn’t think you were disrespecting her, Cat, I promise. She was excited for us to marry. Your cousins are here already, aren’t they?”

Catarina nodded, her chin wobbling. “They weren’t close to her… not like… not like I…” She trailed off. “A few of them are going to take her home, arrange a funeral sometime… They have to miss the wedding, which I understand…”

“She’ll have a send-off worthy of the goddess of light, Cat. I’ll make sure they have the funds at the Darlington Estate, when they’re ready. I know they probably do already, but I want to help.”

“I… Thank you.” She wiped at her eyes. “You’ll make an excellent king when the time comes. You always know what to do and say.”

Rhydian’s face flushed with pride. He smiled and stood up, tugging her hand with him. “Come on. We can go for a ride.”

Catarina shrank back. “If she didn’t die naturally – if someone harmed my aunt…”

Rhydian drew closer to her, reaching out and touching her hair, smoothing a strand away from her forehead. “Is that what you’re afraid of? You’re worried someone would hurt you?”

“Me… or you…” she said quietly.

His voice became husky. “You’re going to be my wife, and I’ll never let anything happen to you. Like you said, I’m going to be a king – I’m first in line – and you’ll be my queen. It’s my job to look after you and the rest of the kingdom. I’ll protect you no matter what, Cat.”

Like you protected Pearl? Kyra wanted to scream, but she clamped her lips together as firmly as an oyster shell. His words – and Catarina’s anxieties – had given her an idea, a way for her to get closer to him… She stepped forwards.

“My lady, my prince, if I may…” She gave a clumsy curtsy, still unused to the movement. “When I was first interviewed, I told your Aunt Ruth I’d been a merchant’s guard, back in Orinthia. I know how to fight. I can protect you, guard you. Ease your anxieties.”

Catarina turned, sniffling and wiping at her eyes. “Really? I shall have to look at Aunt Ruth’s interview notes…” Her voice quivered on the word “aunt”, but she held herself together. “I didn’t have the chance to speak with her before…”

Rhydian frowned, moving closer to Kyra. He circled her, like a shark with its prey. She was overcome with the urge to attack him. *Not yet. Be patient.*

“You don’t look like much of a fighter,” he concluded, standing in front of her now, straightening his shirt. “And I already have the Royal Guard to call upon.”

“I’m stronger than I look,” she ground out. “And your fiancée needs guards too. I can guarantee I’m better than the ones you have, Your Highness.”

Rhydian laughed. “If you insist.” He looked over his shoulder at Catarina. “We’ll consult Ruth’s notes. If you *have* been a guard…” He turned back to Kyra. “We’ll test you first. I need to assess what you can do. You’ll fight me in the courtyard tomorrow morning.”

“Rhydian!” Catarina cried. “Is that necessary?”

“Darling.” He went back to her bed and snaked a hand around her shoulders, pulling her closer, kissing the side of her head. “I want you to feel safe. If your new handmaiden can do the job of guarding us and reassure you, that isn’t a bad thing. But I need to see it for myself first. And it’ll give you something to get up for, won’t it? A reason to leave this room?”

“I… I suppose…”

“Good, it’s settled.”

That’s good enough for me, Kyra thought, stifling a smirk. The downside was, she still needed to get the prince alone to kill him, otherwise, she’d likely be arrested and executed.

Later that evening, Meredith and Kyra were in Catarina’s room, scrubbing her marble floor clean. Catarina had returned from dinner with Rhydian and his aunt and uncle, who had recently arrived at the estate.

“Meredith, Kyra, draw me a bath please,” she ordered. “Lord Wesley was smoking and he barely cracked the door open – too busy chattering away with Princess Veronica about the children. My hair stinks. No oil today. You can add rose petals.”

“Yes, my lady,” said Meredith, dropping her scrubbing brush and jumping to her feet, giving a curtsy.

Kyra curtsied, too, and followed Meredith into the bathroom. The other girl snapped the door shut behind them and set about turning the shiny golden taps that spewed water into the bath. Kyra fetched the petals – stowed away on a white shelf stacked with Catarina’s favourite bathing additions – and they waited for the tub to fill.

“It’s a good thing Catarina doesn’t know Rhydian is sneaking off and smoking,” said Meredith, with a snort. She kept her voice low, despite the pouring water drowning out their conversation.

“Is he?” said Kyra, lifting a brow.

“I assume that’s what he’s doing. He quit months ago, for her, but we all know he’s become tetchy and has found it difficult to stop. Anyway, I’ve seen him going down to the old wellhouse on his own, late at night.”

“The wellhouse?”

“You won’t know it. It’s on the west side, near the staircase to the kitchens, and it’s tucked away. It used to be an old servants’ passage, but no one needs it anymore. Some of the staff think it’s haunted now. It’s old and

creepy, overgrown." Meredith checked the temperature of the taps, cranking up the heat until steam billowed from the water.

"Can't he hide behind a column or a tree? Why bother going there?" She thought of the day she'd arrived, how Nicholas had been smoking down the side of the estate. There were plenty of nooks Rhydian could use, if he wanted to be away from the eyes of his fiancée. A creepy, overgrown place didn't seem like his style and it made her suspicious. What was he up to?

It was also the perfect opportunity. It sounded like he went there alone. If she could follow him…

"I suppose he must like being alone from time to time," said Meredith. "Sometimes I think being royal sounds *exhausting*. They can't go anywhere without an entourage. Imagine everyone knowing your face. You wouldn't get a moment's peace. It'll be even worse when he's king."

"It doesn't sound very pleasant," Kyra agreed. She didn't feel sorry for him, but she couldn't imagine not being able to retreat to her quiet underwater cave for days upon end if she needed to, or swimming around the ocean and having everyone recognise her.

"I tend to be quite happy to blend into the background," said Meredith, while Kyra scattered some pinkish-red petals into the bathtub. "I hate being the centre of attention." Her voice quietened again. "That's probably why Catarina is so anxious for the wedding. She's going to be queen one day."

"I heard a rumour the prince was seeing someone else, before her," Kyra said, in hushed tones. "Do you think he really loves Catarina?"

"Oh, you're talking about Pearl."

Kyra felt like a jellyfish had stung her, at the mention of her sister's name. She kept her face arranged as casually as she could.

"He seemed genuinely torn up about it all – that's what the other staff told me," she said. "Pearl was like a whirlwind. She came here as staff, but he was so taken with her, everyone said he'd end up marrying her and turning her into royalty. It was like something from a storybook. That's what everyone said." Meredith shook her head slowly. "Catarina – they've known each other since they were young. Catarina came here on a visit – that was when I first met Pearl – and I think it made him question everything, whether he was rushing into things with Pearl. Whether she was right for him." Her lips turned down at the corners. "I heard the queen didn't approve of his choice, either. She thought he should marry someone

of higher standing than a maid, especially as a future king, so she arranged Catarina's visit."

"She manipulated things," Kyra clarified.

Meredith's voice was barely a whisper now. "Don't say any of this around Catarina. She hears the staff whispering sometimes, and it's hard on her. She knew how he felt about Pearl. She feels like the second-best choice, even though they have a history."

Kyra didn't expect to feel a stab of sympathy for Catarina. At the same time, irritation needled her scalp. If Rhydian had more conviction, was more assertive in his choices instead of letting his mother influence him, he wouldn't have to hurt people this way.

"The staff are always busy gossiping," said Meredith, rolling her eyes. "They do it every time someone new arrives. When Lord Nicholas arrived here for the wedding, they only went easy on him because he's already friends with some of them." She snorted. "He comes here a lot with his father on business."

"What do the staff say about Nicholas?" she asked.

Meredith raised her eyebrows. "Why? Do you know him? He's friends with some of the other servants but I've only spoken to him properly a few times."

"I met him outside," Kyra said, with a half-shrug.

"He makes friends easily, except with Rhydian. I heard that from one of the kitchen staff." She laughed. "There was a rumour his father wanted to arrange a marriage for him with a noblewoman, and he refused, said he wanted to marry for love and he was waiting for the right person."

"That sounds sensible," Kyra said, her opinion of him rising.

When Catarina's bath was drawn, they returned to the bedroom to find her at her dresser, her eyes rimmed in red. Had she been crying? The jewellery that had adorned her ears, neck and hair was stripped bare. Neither of the girls said anything about her tear-streaked face.

"You're done? Good," Catarina snapped, scrubbing at her face with her hand. "Aunt Ruth always hated it when you were too slow…" She paused. "Meredith, you can help me out of this dress. Kyra, go down to the kitchens and bring a pot of tea," Catarina said. "They made it *far* too strong at dinner and didn't provide enough sugar."

Kyra nodded, rose and curtsied the way Meredith had taught her to. She left Catarina with Meredith – who had set to work helping her remove the

dress – and hurried from the room.

At this hour, the halls of the estate were fairly quiet, most of the royals and guests having retired to their own rooms or to the many drawing rooms. Members of the Royal Guard were stationed at the stairs, and at the most important junctions, including on the way to Catarina's chambers. They nodded at Kyra as she passed them.

Another servant passed her in the hallway, wearing a long dress, an apron and a bonnet. Instead of continuing to walk by, the woman paused, grabbing her arm, sharp nails clenched into Kyra's skin.

Kyra winced. "Let go of me!" she growled.

"Better kill the prince soon," the servant whispered, and Kyra's blood chilled. It was one of Levina's girls, here working at the estate, like Aylin. "We can all *talk* about killing, few of us can actually do it. Do you have the mettle?"

Kyra wrenched her arm free and shoved the woman further away from her. "Do that again, and you might find out."

The servant laughed. Her green eyes glimmered beneath a fringe of auburn hair. "Like I said, we can all embellish. Actions and words are two different things."

"What does it matter to you, anyway?" Kyra snapped.

"Just a friendly reminder." The woman patted Kyra on the shoulder patronisingly, and before Kyra could say anything more, she disappeared down the corridor.

Kyra remained where she was, seething, for a few minutes. What was Levina doing, sending her girls to remind her of her task? Kyra already knew what she had to do. Perhaps Levina wasn't behind this, though. Maybe her girls were gossips, spreading Kyra's ambitions between them, placing bets on whether she would or wouldn't go through with it. It seemed like the type of thing they'd do.

The next morning, Kyra dressed in slightly different servant clothing Meredith had found for her – a pair of puffed-out trousers and a loose white shirt. She found these to be more comfortable than what Aylin had made her suffer through when she first came here; they were looser and cooler, and ideal for fighting. She still hated the feeling of fabric and boots clasping against her legs. She was still getting used to dressing in human clothing,

and twice she missed her leg when trying to put on the trousers. She strung her cross-body bag over her head and shoulder before leaving her room.

She was cornered by another servant in the corridor – not the same auburn-haired woman in the bonnet she'd encountered last time, but a girl with a hooked nose and straight black hair. She'd barely left her room when the woman strode over and leaned against the wall, smirking at her.

"Rhydian's looking remarkably *alive* today," the girl sneered. "I had to serve him tea this morning. I could have slipped in some poison and saved you a task."

"You girls need to find something better to do with your time than taunt me," Kyra snapped back. "I'm sure Levina wouldn't appreciate you poking your tail in where it wasn't wanted."

The girl simply grinned, a dimple forming in her cheek. "She won't wait for you to do it forever. She always puts time frames in her contracts. How long has she given you?"

Kyra stalked away. She wasn't about to tell this girl Levina had given her a time frame of six moons.

"I suppose it doesn't matter," said the girl, trailing after her like a shadow. "You'll become one of us, and you'll end up working for her. I wonder if she'll make you work here in the estate, so you get to see Rhydian every day, as a reminder of how you failed? No, she wouldn't do that. She'd keep you away from him, so you never have the opportunity to kill him again." The girl laughed. "*That's* a better reminder of your failure. You really are useless, aren't you? I would have done it by now."

"Do you ever stop talking?" Kyra gave a fake yawn. "It's tiresome watching your mouth work."

"I bet Levina knows you won't go through with it. It's an easy win for her. You're too much of a soft sponge, like your sister was. I met her, you know—"

Kyra turned and grabbed the girl's arm, shoving her into a wall, narrowly missing an ornate vase on a stand. The girl looked momentarily shocked, then her pale face broke into a grin again.

"Ooh, that's it! You should keep practising – you can work your way up to murder soon enough! We all have to start somewhere—"

Removing her arm from the girl, Kyra stalked away quickly, putting distance between them. The girl's jeers followed her down the corridor; she

tuned them out. How many girls did Levina have working here, anyway? They were relentless, like a shoal of hungry piranhas snapping their jaws.

And they were wrong. She *would* kill Rhydian.

The courtyard where she'd fight Rhydian was near the gardens she'd passed through on arrival at the Whitecliff Estate. Through another door, and down a narrow passage, and there it was: a wide open space with a stone floor. Sprawling trees dotted the edges, and it was encircled by walls covered in creeping ivy, with balconies overlooking the yard. A rack of real weapons was set up beside a collection of wooden ones. The yard was well tended to, the trees blooming with small white flowers, and not a single weed poked from the paving slabs.

Catarina was already there with Meredith, and another young woman with dark hair scooped into a smooth coil. They were standing off to one side. The prince wasn't here yet. Men and women were crowding the balconies above, looking down and pointing from behind hats and fans. Princesses Adelia and Veronica were among them, Adelia's long blonde hair tumbling to her chest in waves, and Veronica's mousy-brown locks clipped in place with a shiny ornament.

"Why are there so many people here?" Kyra muttered to Meredith, when she arrived at their side.

"There are plenty of people at the estate already for the wedding, so I imagine they're bored and curious," Meredith said, all pragmatism. "It's tradition to have lots of guests arrive in the lead-up to the day for various dinners and events, and—"

"You've drawn quite the crowd, Kyra," Catarina cut in, giving a slow, exaggerated yawn and rolling her eyes at Meredith. "Rhydian must have told everyone about you last night."

"I suppose so," Kyra said. Humans must love a spectacle almost as much as Mer loved watching swordfish fight.

"Word travels fast at the estate," said the dark-haired woman. Her eyes settled on Kyra, who thought the woman looked vaguely familiar. Perhaps she just had one of those faces; it wasn't like Kyra had met a lot of humans. And so many of these women looked the same, in their tumbling frilly dresses and adornments. "And she's… fresh meat. That makes her interesting."

Kyra didn't know what the point of the comment was, so she didn't answer.

Catarina snorted. “I love the way you word things, Penny.”

She looked healthier today, dressed in a floaty yellow dress, all ruffles and rumples, with a frilly white shawl thrown over her shoulders to ward off the morning chill. Crystalline droplets hung down from her ears. She’d clearly been up half the night. The thick pasty make-up under her eyes couldn’t hide the dark rings below.

“You look stressed,” Catarina said to Kyra, and waved a hand encased in a lacy glove. “I suggest you show Rhydian exactly what you can do. Don’t hold back. This could be good for your position here. Aunt Ruth believed in you, and I want to know if she was right.” The ghost of sadness spread over her features for a moment, and she cleared her throat. “I’d like to know if you’re good at something, other than failing to make my tea as well as Penny here can make it.”

Penny laughed. She’d painted over her cheeks with pasty white make-up, like Catarina had, but it was cakey in the morning sun.

Kyra resisted rolling her eyes. She didn’t care about her position here. She quickly checked the clasp on her bag – it was strong enough she wasn’t concerned about it popping open and scattering vials of potion everywhere.

Another small group of three women filed into the courtyard, talking in hushed voices with their heads together. Kyra caught part of their conversation: “That servant who found her said she had a warped face… twisted. It wasn’t natural. What manner of death *causes* that?”

“Are you talking about my aunt?” Catarina demanded as they passed. Her face had paled.

One of the women startled. She wore an elaborate, wide-brimmed hat with white feathers poking out of the sides. “Oh, Catarina, darling – I didn’t see you there…”

“I said, are you talking about my aunt?”

“I… I’m so sorry. I thought you knew.”

Catarina’s mouth pursed so tightly her cheeks looked hollow. The two women glanced at one another uncertainly before offering their condolences and moving away, but they didn’t expand on what they’d seen.

Catarina turned to Meredith. “Is that why Rhydian refused to let me see the body? Speak. Have you heard this talk among the servants?”

“I… I… Miss—” Meredith spluttered. The pink tinge to her face said it all.

“I knew it,” Catarina hissed. Despite her vehemence, her eyes filled with tears. “I knew something wasn’t right! And Rhydian knew!”

Penny placed a hand on Catarina’s shoulder, speaking softly. “I’m sure he was trying to protect you.”

Catarina frowned. This was the first indication she had been given that Rhydian was wicked, and a liar. Good. He deserved so much more, and when Kyra was done, she hoped Catarina would see him for what he truly was.

Cheers and clapping alerted them to the prince’s presence. Rhydian waltzed into the courtyard. Several men walked behind him. Kyra noticed Nicholas was standing on one of the balconies above, watching, and her stomach gave a whoosh. His shirt was open at the neck, his hair tousled. He wasn’t clapping for the prince, and she smiled faintly.

“Ah, I thought you were going to be *late* as usual!” Catarina called, her tone barbed. “You best not be late at the altar, or perhaps I’ll change my mind about marrying you.”

A scattering of laughter flowed around the crowd – Penny joined in, covering her hand with her mouth. Rhydian crossed the courtyard to give Catarina a kiss, which she returned stiffly, and there was a chorus of jeers and whistles. She muttered something to him sharply, and Rhydian’s face betrayed his frown briefly.

Next to arrive in the courtyard, shortly after the prince, was a cluster of women in puffy, silken dresses and pearl necklaces. They flocked around Catarina like seagulls around scraps of food.

“Meredith Birdwhistle!” one of them shrieked, as the prince went back to his friends. The girl pointed a finger at Meredith, who shrank back into the shadows of a balcony. All of the girls whistled and clucked, bobbing their heads like birds, and burst into laughter. Catarina and Penny joined the chorus of shrieks, clutching one another as they laughed, as if they might fall over.

“Oh, *girls*!” Catarina cried. “I needed that laugh after everything that’s happened. Thank you.” She made a show of wiping her eyes.

“She does have hair like a bird’s nest, too!” said Penny, smiling.

“Oh, Penny, I’ve already tried to tame it! It never works!” Catarina protested.

Kyra scowled at the women, and at Penny. They were like a group of sea witches cackling over a pot of dark magic. “Don’t mock her,” she snapped.

Inside the shadows, Meredith gasped. “Kyra, don’t, it’s fine…”

“It’s absolutely not fine. They’re behaving like children.”

The women fell silent and stared at her.

“Do you know who you’re talking to?” said Penny, low and dangerous. “You should watch your tone. You might want to bring this one in line, Cat.”

Catarina scowled. “She’s new,” she said. “She doesn’t know the way of things.” She paused as if to emphasise the point, her piercing gaze meeting Kyra’s. Taking a step closer, Catarina lowered her voice. The shadow of a tree had fallen across her features, turning them dark. “Never embarrass me in front of my friends, Kyra. I can take away the opportunity you have here today. One word to Rhydian, and I can end this, and have you scrubbing my bathroom for the rest of the year – no guard position at all. Is that what you want?”

Kyra’s instinct was to argue. Her mind screamed. She closed her eyes, thinking of Pearl’s face. It calmed her to see her sister’s long white-blonde hair, her heart-shaped face dappled with sharp fins. It reminded her of why she was here. She wouldn’t lose her position by being recklessly angry.

“No, Lady Catarina,” she said tightly. “I don’t want that.”

“Maybe you should do it – take this opportunity away from her!” Penny hissed in Catarina’s ear. “She seems far more trouble than she’s worth, and you already have Meredith, who is loyal.” A smirk tugged at Penny’s mouth. “I bet she can’t even fight!”

“We’ll see, won’t we?” said Catarina. “Keep your bite for when you need to defend *me*,” she added to Kyra. Catarina glanced over her shoulder at Meredith, snapping out the lacy fan she’d brought with her, which was threaded with flowers. “Unlike Meredith, you actually have a real chance at making something of yourself here, with your skills. Don’t waste it defending her.”

Penny’s lips pursed. Clearly, she didn’t agree Kyra could make something of herself at the estate. Oh, how Kyra would like to claw both of their silly faces, while Rhydian watched.

“Are we going to start?” called Rhydian from across the courtyard, where he stood with his own friends. “Or are you ladies too busy gossiping?”

The girls surrounding Catarina drew back, giggling, and she joined them on the side-lines near where Meredith stood. Kyra turned to the courtyard,

stepping into the centre.

“How do you fight?” asked Rhydian. His friends moved to crouch on some stone steps leading up to one of the balconies, grinning and calling wordless sounds of encouragement. “I’m a swordsman, myself.” His lip curled upwards.

“With my hands, Your Highness,” said Kyra. She didn’t have her claws, or any sharp fins. Without the brute strength of her tail, she felt weaker. She’d have to make do with her human nails.

He laughed, and his friends joined in.

“Your hands?” he said. “I’ve some experience of hand-to-hand combat too. I mean *proper* training, not brawling in the street outside of an inn or tavern.”

“Is that so?” said Kyra. “I’m sure you’re excellent at it. Perhaps we should end this now, since you clearly don’t need any protection after all, Your Highness?”

“Oooh, she’s sassy!” one of the prince’s friends called.

The other men started to heckle Kyra. She rolled her eyes and shifted her weight from one foot to the other, testing how her new legs felt beneath her, how heavy they were, how the balls of her feet worked versus her toes.

“Can we begin?” she said, aware she was sounding impertinent, but finding it difficult to treat him with politeness. “Or do you need your friends to continue stroking your ego beforehand?”

The crowds roared with laughter – men and women included – this time. Rhydian’s cheeks were tinged with red. He stepped closer to Kyra, crouching slightly.

“Come on, silver tongue,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Kyra didn’t hesitate. She ran for him, swinging with her right arm and aiming a fist at his face.

He dodged her easily. She made an attempt to turn, to grab him before he could escape. She was still uneasy on her feet when moving fast, and she twisted and stumbled, tripping over and falling to the ground.

Hoots of laughter resonated around the courtyard. The princesses were jeering from a balcony. Kyra ignored it; she didn’t even look at the crowd. Nicholas was up there somewhere and her cheeks flamed. Shame was a hot feeling up on the surface, burning her face. She wouldn’t let the prince humiliate her this way.

“Oh, come now!” said Rhydian. “Is this what you wanted to show us all today? This…?” He motioned to her as she struggled to her feet. “Were you really a guard? Wait, did you come here because everyone who paid you to guard them died?” He guffawed, and everyone else joined in. “I can understand why that’d make you desperate to prove—”

She didn’t let him finish. Using the balls of her feet as a springboard, she shot towards him, hand outstretched, swiping at his face. She didn’t manage to reach his cheek, but she clawed his ear with her fingernail as he leapt out of the way. A painful blow to her back, from his clenched fist, sent her crashing down again.

Laughter rang out. Boiling shame consumed her – again. She wasn’t herself. How could she do this when this body didn’t belong to her?

“I’m not impressed yet!” Rhydian called.

Somewhere along the edges of the courtyard, Catarina was calling out to Kyra, too: “I suppose you told Aunt Ruth a lie! Is there any point continuing?”

Kyra hauled herself to her feet. “I’m not a liar!” she shouted. Not true – she’d lied about who she was. She hadn’t been lying about her fighting ability. She balled her hands. *He* was the liar, for pretending to care for her sister and discarding her.

She faced Rhydian. His trousers were tan, his black boots polished and without a single scuff mark. Every hair on his head was smoothed back, neat. His golden skin seemed to shine as the sun fell onto half of the courtyard. He was still laughing, the light catching his perfectly straight teeth.

Right now, she hated him with every piece of her being. She traced the jutting ridges on the back of her human hands. *Sea Mother, please guide me.*

Without giving him any warning, she pushed off from the ground, and launched herself at him.

She balled her fist again – and struck.

The strike sent him crashing back onto the stone floor. When he came to his senses, she decided she wasn’t done. She charged, leaping onto his chest, pinning him down. His seaglass necklace flashed at his throat, an iridescent rainbow. She could kill him, right now.

He was beneath her, squeezed between her human legs. Dazed, she stared down – her legs were stronger than she’d expected. She could

squeeze the life out of him if she chose – his frame was slighter and taller than hers, less curves.

Her fingers itched to close around his throat, to watch as the life left his eyes. She could prove Levina's girls wrong, show them she had what it took to do this.

His choked gasp brought her back to herself. Rhydian's brown eyes were wide, his previously smooth hair messy and splayed along the stone. "Fine, you win," he growled. "That was… You have a strong grip. You can get off me now."

She hesitated. The courtyard was silent save for the chirruping of birdsong. She couldn't move.

He was defenceless. And she wanted to end him.

Chapter Ten

"Uh, hello? What are you waiting for? Get off me!" Rhydian said.

His sharp words punctured Kyra's mind and she dragged herself off him, straightening her bag and the loop-link chain. *Focus.* She was losing herself and she couldn't afford to, not here, not now. She couldn't kill him in front of all of these people; it would be the end of her. Trying to cover up her hesitation, she reluctantly held out a hand to help him to his feet, and ground her teeth together so hard they squeaked when he accepted.

The gathered crowd clapped and cheered, albeit less enthusiastically than they had before, when they'd assumed Rhydian would win. Kyra's hands were shaking and she folded her arms to hide it. She'd come so close to losing. She needed to be careful.

The prince straightened his necklace and his shirt, smoothing out the patterned gold fabric weaving across the chest. He ran a hand over his hair, pushing it back into place. "It seems you spoke truthfully," he said, "although it took you a while to show your real skill."

"I was out of practice, Your Highness," she said quickly. "It's been a while since I worked as a guard. I didn't lie to you. I can do it."

"I can see that. Catarina!" he called, turning his head to address his fiancée. The girls either side of Catarina beamed, fanning themselves – except Penny, who remained stoic, unaffected by the prince's presence. "She has the skill to protect you."

"So it would seem!" Catarina said. "I'm impressed, Kyra. You've made up for your lack of domesticity and house-training." The other girls laughed. Penny didn't.

Rhydian looked pointedly at Kyra. "I expect you to train daily. If you're to protect my future wife, the future queen, you won't let yourself slacken.

Not while you're at the estate. Understood?"

"Yes," said Kyra.

"You'll need someone to spar with every day. We'll need to find someone who can train you to—"

"I'm happy to do it," said a voice.

They turned, and Nicholas was striding towards them, smiling faintly. Why was he volunteering? He wasn't exactly good friends with Rhydian, as he'd made clear.

"You?" Rhydian said, and rolled his eyes. "Yes, you can use a sword—"

"I also rise far earlier than you and your friends in the morning, and I don't care if I miss out on wedding planning, or another insufferable riding session with my father and your family," Nicholas cut in. "In fact, I'd rather do something interesting like this instead." He smiled at Kyra.

Rhydian hesitated. "Fine," he said. "Someone needs to do it. You should know, it's an unpaid role."

"That's fine."

The prince's lips quirked. "Maybe avoid telling your father, though, eh? It's not a position befitting of a duke's son, is it?"

Nicholas's expression soured. Rhydian turned away as the gathered group laughed. The prince strode away to speak with his sisters, and chatter broke out, groups dispersing and vanishing back into the estate now the display of fighting was over.

"Hello," Nicholas said to Kyra. His voice was like Mer song, melodic and gentle.

"Good morning," she said awkwardly. "You didn't have to do that – volunteer to help."

"It's no bother. You were amazing back there. I'd love to see more of what you can do. I still feel like I've met you somewhere before, seen your face. Is that ridiculous?" He laughed, scraping a hand over his neck.

"No, it's not," she said.

"It sounds so trite. I don't say that to every girl, honestly. It sounds like something one of Rhydian's friends would say." He wrinkled his nose, and she laughed.

"I believe you." She couldn't tell him why – because he *had* in fact seen her before, when she'd pulled him from the sea – so she changed the subject. "If you're going to train me, I hope you know I'm out of practice with fighting," she said. "And I've never used a sword before."

“We can fix that.”

She laughed dryly. “I almost let him beat me.”

“But you didn’t. And you clawed his ear the first time. I think you drew blood. I was trying not to laugh.”

Kyra arched a brow. “If you don’t mind me asking, why are you here at the estate, if you aren’t friends with the prince? You could have avoided the wedding entirely.” She’d wondered that since she first saw him, when she visited the surface with her sister. He’d been at the beach with the prince then, too. Meredith had mentioned something about his father, but she didn’t understand.

He lifted a shoulder and dropped it again. “My father is a duke, and close to the Harcourts. We’ve moved in the same circles all my life. I’m expected to be at events like coronations, royal weddings, parties.”

She felt a pang of longing for her own father. She missed him, and she wished they hadn’t left things on bad terms. “Is your father here?” she asked.

“He’s staying at the estate too. He’s often dealing with business,” Nicholas answered. “Our family own the best jewellery business in the kingdom. It’s very popular. I believe Catarina is buying some for the wedding. The Harcourts purchase our wares a lot. Which is why I’m often stuck at their events. I don’t mind, though, I like being by the sea.”

“You work in the jewellery business, too?” Her sister might have liked his jewellery, if she’d been here to see it. The pain in her chest was almost too much to bear.

He shook his head. “No, I hate all of that. I much prefer doing charity work. The only reason I like coming here is the sea. We saved a beached whale recently, off the coast. Not long after we arrived.”

Kyra’s head snapped up. A beached whale? She could feel her heart drumming against her chest. Whales were sacred – blessed by the Sea Mother. “You like the sea?” she said tentatively.

“I do. I have friends who are sailors. We work to rescue animals in need. My father doesn’t like it.”

“Why ever not?”

“He doesn’t think a duke’s son should be doing that kind of thing. He’d rather I make him more money, and not waste the family’s wealth.” Nicholas snorted.

“I can’t see why he’d be unhappy with you helping animals.” She understood struggling when it came to family, so she added, “My father doesn’t agree with some of my decisions, either.”

“Really? And how do you deal with it?”

“I ignore him, and do what I want anyway.”

He laughed even harder, but then he sobered. “I wish it were that simple.” His gaze was fixed over her shoulder and she suspected Catarina was growing impatient to have her handmaiden back. “I suppose I’ll see you here in the courtyard tomorrow morning?”

“You will,” she said, and turned back to Catarina and the others.

The rest of the morning was spent ferrying Catarina around to various appointments. Kyra couldn’t believe how many unimportant, banal things humans dealt with in a day. Meredith seemed equally bored by it all. An appointment with the tailor, who wanted to discuss the lace gloves Catarina would wear for the wedding. A meeting with the baker to taste cake flavours. And later that afternoon, there was a lunch in one of the estate’s gardens with the princesses, Catarina’s cousin Gabrielle and Penny, who Catarina insisted on bringing along. Kyra had learned she was one of Catarina’s childhood friends, visiting the estate for the wedding.

“We’re *relaxing*,” Catarina trilled to Adelia and Veronica at the lunch. “There will be plenty of time for hard work when we’re married! That’s what Aunt Ruth always said.” What the “hard work” entailed exactly, Kyra didn’t know, because whenever life after marriage came up, it seemed to involve discussing which elaborate, sprawling estate they would live in, and how many staff members they’d need.

The girls were gathered around a large white table, dressed in colourful gowns and silk gloves. An overhead canopy draped in ivy protected them from the harsh sun, casting shade across the paving. They were on the east side of the estate, and a garden and rolling green grass stretched out to the side, bursting with flowers of all shades. The sea wasn’t visible from here, concealed by rows of trees.

“You know, I really don’t remember you, Penny!” said Gabrielle, drinking from her teacup with her little finger poking out. She was quite a bit older than Catarina, with crinkles around her green eyes. “Catarina says you grew up together?”

“Oh yes – in a way!” said Penny. “We were teenagers, weren’t we – maybe thirteen? I was attending one of the Darlington Estate balls. We became fast friends. We’ve mostly written to each other since – except when I’d come to the annual Darlington ball.”

“That’s right,” said Catarina, nodding. “I’ve missed you dearly, we’ll *have* to make sure we meet more than once a year in future!”

“I *loved* those balls!” said Gabrielle, laughing and sipping some more tea. “Honestly, the many faces of those balls blur into one, especially after a number of years.”

“Aunt Ruth loved them, too,” said Catarina sadly. “She was always the best dressed.”

“Oh, she was! And her lipstick was always so perfect – she used to teach me how to put it on.”

Penny smiled and raised her teacup, wrinkling her nose. “I don’t like this flavour of Lumen tea,” she announced, setting down her teacup. A huge lilac feather was sticking out of her hair, which had been braided and stamped to the back of her head. “I’d like some water instead. Kyra, will you fetch me some from inside?”

“Yes, do as she says, Kyra,” said Catarina, waving her hand. She turned back to Gabrielle, who had been examining her nails and suggesting she have them “sorted out” before the wedding. The princesses Adelia and Veronica were engaged in their own conversation at the other end of the table.

Kyra glanced at Meredith, who was standing in the shade by one of the windows. Kyra lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug, and went to fetch a water jug from the kitchens, which were, fortunately, close to the garden.

When she returned, most of the girls were chattering, sipping tea and nibbling at cake in between. She carried the water jug towards Penny, who hurried to make room between her and Catarina on the glass tabletop. Trays and towers had been set out, filled with cakes, small sandwiches and pastries.

“Set it here,” Penny said, indicating the space she’d made.

Kyra crossed the short space, and as she did, Penny’s foot came out and caught her ankle. With a wordless cry, Kyra tripped, splashing water down her front – and across part of the table. Catarina squealed and jumped to her feet as water sloshed across some of the plates, making the sandwiches and cakes immediately soggy. Water dripped off the edges of the table.

“Kyra!” Catarina cried. She bashed into her chair as she stepped back, away from the spillage. “For the sake of the goddess!” She pressed her fingers to the bridge of her nose. “You should have asked Meredith!” she said to Penny.

Penny lifted her arms as if to say *I had no idea*.

She did that on purpose! Kyra thought, clamping her teeth together to keep from shouting the words.

“Don’t just stand there, Meredith, fetch something to clean this up!” Gabrielle demanded.

Meredith hurried towards the doors. As she passed Kyra, she paused and muttered, “Don’t worry. We’re staff – we always get targeted. It’s the way things are.” With that, she vanished.

Kyra frowned. Meredith might have become used to being treated this way, but she would never. The sooner she could kill the prince and leave, the better. Even working for the sea witch in exile had to be better than putting up with these silly human women.

That evening, when Kyra and Meredith were finally alone in their room after the chaos of the day, Meredith flopped down onto her bed face first, while Kyra hung her cross-body bag over her bedpost.

“I’m *so* tired, I need a month off from these events. I can’t wait until it’s over,” she said, voice muffled by her pillow. She rolled onto her back, her dark curls spilling around her shoulders. “You defended me this morning, in the courtyard. I haven’t had a chance to say thank you.”

“You do so much for Catarina, but they still mock you,” Kyra said. “It’s not right. You should stick up for yourself.”

Meredith shrugged. “Like I said before, it comes with the role of being a handmaiden to royalty. You saw – Penny tripped you, at the lunch. Nobles can be haughty at best, and downright nasty at worst. I don’t want to lose this job. That’s why you came here too, isn’t it? You need this just as much as I do. That’s the price we pay.”

Kyra said nothing. She did need it, but not for the reasons Meredith thought.

Meredith grabbed a pillow and hugged it to her chest. “Most of Catarina’s other handmaidens leave after a few weeks or months, so I’ve never befriended any of them. They can’t handle it. You seem different. Like you’ll be able to handle her, and the others.”

“I should hope so.”

“You could do well here.”

“Why are you here?” Kyra asked, turning the questions back on her. “I know you send money to your family, which is a noble cause in itself when they’re struggling. But how did you end up with Catarina, instead of in some other position, with someone else? Someone less… conceited?”

Meredith sat up, tucking her legs underneath her and leaning her elbows on the pillow. “I’ve been with Catarina since she was fourteen. I was seventeen. They wanted someone close to her age, after an older handmaiden retired. She was being educated at home by a governess, and they thought it’d be nice if she was around other girls her age. My village was close to the Darlington Estate, and they put up notices locally. I think Catarina’s mother wanted her to learn about the real world, too, get to know some normal people. Commoners, as the royals like to call us.” She snorted.

“And you liked working for her?” It didn’t seem like they’d become friends, so Kyra didn’t understand why she hadn’t found work elsewhere, or quit.

“It was fine at first, when we were younger. We talked – it was amicable, friendly even. I made good money, I had a nice room, and my family had coin. As we grew older… she started making more friends, and they were all… like those girls you saw in the courtyard. Catarina isn’t like that deep down, you know. She’s fair to a lot of her staff, and she’s not as mean as she seems. She gets carried away, when she’s around the other girls and her family.” Meredith bit her lip. “I ignore it, when they get like that. I’m here to help my family and that’s what matters the most.”

“Sounds hard,” Kyra said. Meredith sounded trapped. She took a seat on her own bed. “Are you able to visit your family?”

“Sometimes. I haven’t seen them in a few years. Catarina had an engagement in their town once. We write all the time.”

“Being apart from family is difficult,” Kyra said, without thinking.

“What about yours?”

She couldn’t tell her. Not all of it. “I wish I hadn’t needed to leave my father too,” she said carefully. “I had to.”

“So you understand,” said Meredith. “I guess we’re both in the same position.”

“I suppose we are.”

They shared a smile. When she'd first arrived, Kyra had been struck by Ruth's rudeness and how spoilt Catarina was. Meredith was so different.

"Nicholas volunteered to train you," said Meredith, with a sly smile. "I bumped into him in the corridor earlier. He was asking about you."

"He… was?"

"He's never gone out of his way to talk to me before, and I'm always too busy with Catarina to talk to him much myself," she said, her smile growing wider. "I've only ever talked to him occasionally, at events! He seems to have taken an interest in you." She wiggled her eyebrows playfully.

"Oh, stop it." Kyra smiled in spite of herself. "I'm not here for that kind of thing."

"We'll see, when he works his charms on you!" Meredith giggled.

"I'm going to draw myself a bath," said Kyra, standing and stretching. She was feeling guilty for smiling about Nicholas. This must have been how her sister felt about Rhydian, when she first arrived here.

She needed the feel of cool water over her body, to close her eyes and forget she had legs and smooth skin for a while. If she stayed in the bathtub long enough, perhaps she could convince herself it was the ocean, and she hadn't lost her sister after all.

Chapter Eleven

The following morning was Kyra's first sparring session with Nicholas. It was Sunday, so she and Meredith had the day off. She dressed and walked down to the courtyard – the cross-body bag came with her, as she didn't like leaving it unattended with the potions inside. She'd barely seen Rhydian lately, and when she did, he was surrounded by servants, family, or male friends. The lead-up to a wedding wasn't a good time to kill a prince, apparently.

It was a grey morning in Lumen, the sun concealed by a patchwork of hazed clouds. The estate was quiet save for the servants who were up early to hurry to the kitchens or to clean the floors and windows. Kyra dressed in loose clothing – a belted tunic and trousers – and grabbed her bag, stringing it across her body. She took it everywhere with her, the potions from Levina stashed inside safely, just in case.

When Kyra arrived at the courtyard, Nicholas was already there. He was sitting beneath a tree, his legs stretched out and a book in his lap. He wore spectacles that shone in the daylight, but when he noticed her, he pulled them off, tucked them safely in his jacket pocket, and grinned. He'd looked oddly attractive in those glasses – Mer had near-perfect eyesight, especially in the dark, and didn't need them. The studious look suited him.

"Morning," he called. "Ready to learn from the master?"

He rose to his feet and set his book down on one of the stone steps leading up to the balconies overhead. The jacket he wore was black silk, a white shirt underneath. He tugged off the jacket, bundling it onto one of the stone steps, and rolled up his shirt sleeves, exposing bronzed arms. For a long moment, she couldn't take her eyes off them.

"I'd best prepare to be bruised, if you're the master fighter," Kyra said, tearing her eyes away, "and pick up something for my injuries in the

village. Meredith invited me after our sparring session. She told me you were welcome to come, too."

"That's kind of her. I might oblige you both." He crossed his arms, grinning. "It wouldn't hurt to get you some books on sword-fighting."

"I don't know the first thing about swords," she spluttered. She was used to daggers or makeshift spears made from rocks and bits of shipwreck. "I prefer fists, or daggers."

"Daggers?" He huffed out a laugh. "I can't say I know anyone who uses one of those, unless they're gutting a fish."

"If they're good enough for gutting fish, they're good enough for people."

"A fair point. Let's hope you won't need to do any… ah… gutting. Just defending." He laughed. "I can't teach you how to use a dagger, though. Fists for today. I'll teach you to use a sword next time. You can study some books first."

"Very well." She looped her bag onto the branch of a nearby tree, so it couldn't get in the way.

They got into position, facing each other from either side of the courtyard. She hadn't even moved yet, but her skin was warm with anticipation. The daylight was catching his hair, frosting it with a reddish shine, the wind tousling it about his forehead. His smile made her feel disarmed – so she was unprepared when he darted forwards first.

"No time for daydreaming!" he cried. He aimed a blow at her side.

She skittered out of the way, his arm glancing past her, and she smelt a woodsy scent on the air in the aftermath. He was light on his feet, swift. She'd felt the force behind the attack.

"Who taught you to fight?" she asked. Her heart was pounding and they'd barely started. She couldn't get his woodsy scent out of her nose.

"I told you I had sailor friends," he said, twisting to face her, and offering one of the most handsome smiles she'd ever seen. "Most people assume they're disorderly brawlers, but they're well trained."

He came at her again. This time she was ready, and she caught his arm, knocking it out of the way. He spun quickly, tried again with his other fist. She twisted, blocking, and they entered into a kind of dance: step-blow, step-blow. Kyra only managed to block him two more times, until his movement picked up speed and she couldn't keep up. Her legs tangled beneath her, and she fell, uselessly, to the ground.

“Ugh,” she groaned, rubbing her tailbone.

“That was good,” he said. “You blocked well. Try to strike me next time.” He held out a hand to help her to her feet.

She took it, and even though it was warm and clammy, her heart jumped at his soft touch, at the scent of him so close to her. Did she imagine it, or did he hold on to her hand for a beat too long, his eyes fixed on their interlocked fingers?

“I’d love to keep holding your hand, but we have work to do,” he said, and she couldn’t tell if he was joking or not. “Again.”

They carried on, and on, and on. By the time they’d finished their session together, Kyra’s throat burned and she was gasping for breath, her hair sticking to the back of her neck. How did *he* still look so good? He was coated in a sheen of sweat, down the side of his face and neck – it didn’t take away from his attractiveness. Even his ruffled hair was striking. Overhead, the clouds were starting to clear, making way for the sunshine, spilling down onto the stone beneath their feet.

“You did well,” Nicholas said. He was out of breath, too, and the sleeves of his shirt were askew. He tugged them down, straightening them, and reached for his jacket. “I’ll have to treat you to something in the village.”

“Treat me?”

“Being rewarded for doing well helps with training. Spurs you on to keep going. At least, that’s what my fencing instructor used to say. He taught me everything I know about swordplay.”

Kyra had no idea what fencing was, but she could decipher it had something to do with swords, so she nodded as if she understood these human customs. She was stuck on the part of the conversation where he wanted to “treat” her.

“Maybe I’ll buy you a pot of tea, too,” he said. “It’d be good to get to know you better. There isn’t enough time to talk when we’re so focused on brawling.” He grinned, his teeth reflecting the sunlight.

“That’s kind of you,” she said, and her mind filled with questions – she wanted to know all about him, too. “Meredith said to meet her at the estate entrance.” Kyra crossed the yard and retrieved her bag from the tree branch where she’d hung it. “The coachman will be there at around ten – with the carriage to take the servants into the village. That’s what Meredith said.” She already knew the answer to the next question, but she said it anyway,

her tone light and teasing: “Are you sure you’re okay riding with servants, my lord?”

He snorted. “I’m not like the prince. Haven’t you figured that out yet?” He shrugged on his jacket and checked a shiny pocket watch he had tucked away on the inside. “We have some time if you want to freshen up.”

Kyra attempted to smooth her hair. “It couldn’t hurt.” She wasn’t used to becoming dishevelled so easily; the cool waters of the sea washed all of that away, and her hair usually flowed behind her, rather than clinging to her neck.

Nicholas laughed and approached her, reaching up to her head. “Your hair’s sticking up.” He brushed his hand over her forehead, and her heart hammered at his touch. It took her a while to find words.

“Thanks,” she said. “Yours is, too. It looks good. You can leave it like that.”

He laughed, and her chest filled with pride that she’d made him smile.

They visited one of the servants’ bathrooms before heading outside to the carriage – Kyra splashed cool water onto her face and used some of it to wash off parts of her hair. Two female servants wearing white bonnets and aprons were talking in hushed voices at a nearby basin, their heads bowed close together. They’d barely noticed Kyra come in.

“Yes, make sure you don’t go down the passage,” one girl informed the other. “It doesn’t lead anywhere, anyway, just to the old wellhouse. Use the routes I showed you, and you won’t get lost.”

“No one uses it? Is that because it’s haunted?” the other girl asked, her eyes wide. “Do you think it’s the same sorceress who sings on the coast? The one with the snakes in her hair?”

“That’s a foolish rumour.”

“Someone said they heard moaning, or voices, inside. It could have been the sorceress… I overheard one of the sailors saying he saw her in the night once, waving her staff like she was conjuring a curse.”

“Nonsense. Don’t listen to any gossip. Everyone here gets bored with chores sometimes. Making up stories is how some of the staff entertain themselves. And sailors see all sorts of unexplainable things at sea. Pay it no mind.”

The other girl didn’t look convinced. Kyra pursed her lips – the Levina rumours aside, were they talking about the passage to the wellhouse

Meredith had mentioned? Kyra left them to it, squeezed her hair out and returned to Nicholas, already feeling better.

“You’re damp,” he said. “Better be careful you don’t trickle on the floor, or the prince might have your head.”

She nudged him. “Do you know something about a haunted passage?”

He groaned. “Are the servants still talking about that? It’s a story – insensitive of them to keep making up tales when Ruth has died. I’m tired of hearing the one about the sorceress.”

“Meredith said she saw Rhydian going out there,” she said.

He lifted a brow. “To the wellhouse? Why would he go there? There’s nothing of interest there. It’s overgrown.”

“I don’t know.”

“Unless he’s taken up smoking again and wants to do it where he can’t be seen. Catarina won’t be pleased.”

“That’s what Meredith said.”

Outside, the sky was scattered with clouds, with the sun peeking through on occasion, making the water in the large fountain sparkle and glimmer. A servant in a beige tunic was watering the flower beds using a green can. The estate’s painted black-and-gold gates were thrown open; the coachman had already arrived and was waiting inside. A couple of servants were standing chatting to him. The carriage was clearly for servants: it was large and plain, the wood painted a muted dark green, with an open top. The only indication this carriage had anything to do with the Harcourt royal family was the crest stitched into the coachman’s hat – and it was subtle.

They approached the carriage, and the coachman turned and waved. “Morning, my lord Nicholas! Is there a problem?” He was a tall, older man wearing a long black coat studded with silver buttons, and white gloves.

“No problem,” said Nicholas. He approached the horses tied to the carriage, two sleek black creatures with long feathery manes and tails. One had a diamond-shaped white patch on its forehead. They snuffled, startling Kyra, who drew back; she’d never been near such creatures. Nicholas smiled and patted the animal’s nose. “These are beautiful shires,” he told the coachman.

“Thank you, sir.”

“I’ll be joining the servants in coming to the village. I trust that’s alright?”

Kyra didn’t miss the way the coachman blinked in surprise before answering.

“O-Of course, sir!” he said. “I’m sure you would be able to take one of the carriages for visiting lords and ladies, and be more comfortable besides __”

“Don’t worry about that. I promised Kyra here a gift.”

The coachman looked flummoxed at the idea of a lord presenting a servant with a gift, never mind travelling with servants, and gripped the reins tightly. Nicholas patted the horse one more time and led Kyra to the side of the carriage. Meredith appeared a few moments later, hurrying towards them around the fountain and waving.

“Oh, good, I thought I wouldn’t make it in time!” she panted, reaching them and catching her breath. “I overslept! Hello, Lord Nicholas,” she added.

Nicholas waved a hand. “Just Nicholas. It’s Meredith, isn’t it?”

“You… remember my name?”

“We’ve spoken once or twice, haven’t we?”

“Well, yes…” She shook her head. “Most lords and ladies wouldn’t remember my name after a few meetings.”

“I assume most of them wouldn’t bother to try,” he said. “After you, ladies.” He opened the side door to the carriage and held out a hand.

They piled inside, huddling on the benches, Kyra positioning her bag in her lap. More servants showed up, clutching small bags, probably with their coin inside. Kyra had brought some with her, too. She’d never even *seen* human money before, and now she was being given it on a regular basis. She had no idea what to do with it.

“He came,” Meredith said under her breath, nudging Kyra, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “I knew he would. He likes you.”

“I heard there’s a kitchen boy who likes you,” Kyra retorted, with a faint smile.

Meredith’s cheeks turned pink. “Where did you hear that? Who told you?”

Kyra lifted a shoulder. “You were right about gossip moving quickly here.”

Meredith opened and closed her mouth a few times. “He doesn’t like me. At least… I don’t think he does.” She fiddled with a strand of her hair.

“Ah, you like him too.”

“I… Well, that’s neither here nor there, if he isn’t interested!”

“You should talk to him. Find out.”

“You say it like it’s simple!” She huffed out a breath, and lowered her voice, glancing at Nicholas, but he was moving aside to make room for someone else on the bench behind them, and wasn’t paying attention. “Have *you* found out if Nicholas likes you? Have you asked him outright?”

Kyra was silent.

“See!” Meredith smirked. “You should take your own advice, Kyra.”

The carriage was near to full when it finally clattered through the open gates and out onto the road. Moving in a carriage was *not* a feeling Kyra liked: it was bumpy, and her tailbone bashed against the wooden seat, where she was already sore from sparring.

As they left the estate behind them, the scenery distracted her from the discomfort. She’d never seen anything like it under the sea. Sprawling, lush green fields; clusters of trees towering towards the blue sky, leaves billowing in the wind; rolling hills of grass; white birds wheeling through the air. And in the distance, a glimpse of the sea, an expanse of turquoise winking and dancing like diamonds.

“Lumen is beautiful,” she breathed.

Meredith smiled. “You’ll like Amherst Village. It’s quaint.”

The carriage continued on down the weaving roads, passing fields of grazing horses and sheep. Behind them, the others servants chattered, and there were more discussions of the wellhouse and the haunting songs of the sorceress.

“As long as we don’t hear the song on the night of the wedding,” one of the girls said. “That might be a bad omen!”

Meredith rolled her eyes at Kyra, and she smiled back. The songs were probably whales – Levina didn’t have a singing bone in her body. She’d pointed out as much when talking about Narissa. *The wretched girl has a voice blessed by the Sea Mother, though – always singing. I detest singing.* Maybe it had been Narissa the servants were hearing, not Levina. If Meredith only knew some rumours had their basis in reality.

It was a longer journey to the village than Kyra had expected. By the time it came into view – rooftops poking up in amongst the green, and a road lined with trees – she was aching all over and already not looking forward to the journey back.

They rattled into Amherst Village, and Kyra leaned over the sides of the carriage for a better look. A cobblestone road sprawled into the village, bordered either side by brick homes the colour of sand, some with painted red or blue window slats. Pink and red flowers hung in brightly coloured pots at every corner and squatted in doorways.

The road opened out and split off into various avenues; wooden tables were set up outside, covered by umbrellas to protect townsfolk from the sun. Signs hung from buildings: *The Crêperie*, *Cherry Tea Shop*, *Tailor of Amherst*, *Amherst's Best Antiquities*, *The Draco Bookshop*. People milled about everywhere – women in bright dresses carrying shopping baskets, men holding small children, merchants scribbling messages on boards in chalk about their latest offerings.

Her sister would have *loved* this. It was all so human, what she'd always wanted. Had she visited the village, too? Walked these same cobbles with Rhydian?

"What do you think?" said Meredith.

"It's so busy," said Kyra.

"It's market day," Meredith explained. "Everyone likes to get here early to see what they can find."

The carriage let them out in a small square with a sealed-up well in the centre, decorated with an assortment of bursting flowers and an antique brass bell. A huge inn sat to one side, curtains thrown open and a group of men lingering in the doorway.

"I'll be back for you at two – don't be late or you'll be walking back to the estate!" the coachman called over the servants' heads, after they'd climbed out of the carriage. He clicked his tongue at the horses, snapped the reins and clattered off back down the road.

"I want to go to the bookshop first!" Meredith declared. "I feel like I've read *everything* at the estate already."

"Good, we can get a swordplay book for you, Kyra," said Nicholas.

"Swordplay? Aren't you doing training for that?"

"Doesn't mean she can't work on her posture in between," Nicholas pointed out. "You can help her, Meredith."

"Well, if you need to have a straight back at any point, imagine you're talking to Catarina," Meredith said, laughing. "She *hates* it when we slouch."

Kyra snorted.

They walked the cobbled streets, Meredith leading the way, heading down a sloping hill with shops either side. The sun was already bright and beating down, the sky a wash of pale blue, and many of the cafés had fabric coverings hanging over outdoor seating to keep customers cool.

The bookshop was nestled between a clothing shop with mannequins wearing brightly coloured gowns standing in the window, and a shop shrouded in shade selling various types of cheeses.

Pushing their way into *The Draco Bookshop*, they were struck by the smell of musty air. Kyra wrinkled her nose; it smelt vaguely like Catarina's laundry, a kind of aged smell. Rows and rows of dusty shelves were packed into the darkened space, with ladders leading up to narrow passages weaving around the higher shelves. Only a few other people were inside, leafing through books. An old man in glasses sat at a desk at the back, behind a stack of papers, and he nodded at them in greeting.

"Ah, I love the smell of books!" Meredith said, taking in a deep breath.

"I'd rather sniff Catarina's breakfast pastries," said Kyra, shaking her head in dismay. Nicholas laughed loudly, drawing a disgruntled look from a man standing nearby with a book in his hand.

Meredith vanished amongst the shelves, her tangle of dark hair blending with the shadows. Nicholas gestured for her to follow him, and they weaved through the shelving until he stopped and began pulling books from the shelves, checking their spines.

"Here we are," he said. "Weaponry. Swordplay."

He kept searching until he found one he was satisfied with and held it up. "This should be a good guide for you," he said. "It's a little old but it teaches posture, steps. We can put it into practice in the courtyard."

"Very well," she said, and made to take it from him.

He held it out of reach. "A gift from me, as your teacher," he said, with a smile. He patted the pocket of his jacket.

"That's kind of you," she said. "I do have money from Catarina though," she added.

"Spend it on something you like, and let me take care of the boring educational materials."

"Alright…"

He helped her with no expectation of anything in return: Rhydian hadn't offered to give them anything to train her, and Nicholas had nothing to gain except helping her. He was so… different to anyone she'd met. She couldn't

deny she was interested in him too, but she wasn't going to be here forever, and he would forget her. It wasn't fair on him if she encouraged this, was it?

"Let's go buy this," he said. "Meredith might be a while; she's got her nose buried in a book over there. Shall we go to a café and wait?"

She had no idea what visiting a café entailed but she nodded.

They told Meredith where they were going and ventured to a small café a little way down the cobbled lane. The outdoor seating was shaded by a huge yellow umbrella, the window bursting with cakes stuffed with berries and cream, pastries, and biscuits decorated with flowers. Nicholas ordered them some Lumen tea – something she hadn't yet tried at the estate – and two slices of cake, and they sat outside in the shade together.

"Are you okay?" Nicholas asked. "You're quiet."

She pushed aside thoughts of herself and Nicholas. She couldn't voice those. "It's quite different here, to where I come from," she explained, taking a sip of her tea so she'd appear more natural, and watching a couple walk by, the woman holding a frilly umbrella to ward off the harsh sun.

"In Orinthia?" he said, and she wished she hadn't said anything – what if he asked more questions about a place she didn't even know anything about? "The heat's probably a change for you. I've been to Orinthia. Endless snow, always cold. I never saw an ice troll, though."

"No… nor did I," she bluffed.

"The prince was discussing going there on a royal visit once he's married," Nicholas said, blowing on his own tea to cool it as he raised the cup to his lips. "Catarina won't like that. I'm sure you've heard the stories about the sorceress there – who turns folks into ice trolls?"

"I… Yes, of course, many times. From my… ah… family." She hadn't the faintest idea what he was talking about.

The conversation moved on, and he proceeded to tell her about a sailing trip he once took off the coast of Orinthia, where he and the other sailors saw narwhals in the waters. This made her lean forwards in anticipation – she'd heard of narwhals, in distant corners of her sea kingdom, but they didn't frequent the royal Mer palace, or where she lived in her cave with her father.

"Incredible," she breathed, when he was done telling the story. "I've always wanted to see a narwhal. We don't live near the coast, in Orinthia," she added hastily. "We're more inland."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Didn't you take a ship to get here?"

“Ah… yes. We didn’t see any narwhals.”

“Well, if you’d ever like a sailing trip, if you can escape from Catarina…” He winked at her over his teacup. “I could take you.”

The thought made her insides swirl. She’d always been below the waves. The thought of being on a ship with him, of experiencing what it’d be like, gave her a thrill she hadn’t expected to feel.

“Maybe,” she said, “if Catarina would allow it.”

“I can’t wait to be at sea again,” he told her.

That makes two of us, she thought wryly.

“Do you go sailing a lot?” she asked.

He nodded. “I can usually convince my father to fund my trips. I offer to take his jewellery abroad and sell it for profit. I come back with money for him, and I get to experience the sea, maybe help some sea life along the way. It keeps him happy, and I get what I want out of it.”

“I see. You seem to like sea life,” she pointed out.

“The men call me the ship animal doctor.” He snorted. “I always end up finding something in need of help. Last time it was a bird with a broken wing. In the end, it didn’t want to leave the ship, and the guys kept it.” He shook his head at the memory, smiling into his tea.

“What’s your favourite fish?” she enquired. “Wait – your favourite to look at first. Then your favourite fish to eat.” She grinned, imagining de-boning a fish for him in her cave.

“I’ve never really thought about it,” he said. “I like dolphins. They’re always so friendly when you’re sailing, leaping alongside the boat.”

“Dolphins can be such show-offs though.”

He laughed.

Soon, Meredith emerged from the bookshop, waving at them from a short way away, a brown paper bag clutched in her hand. Nicholas slid the one containing the swordplay book across the table between them.

“Make sure you study this,” he reminded her. “I won’t be going easy on you.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to.” She took the bag, surprised to find she’d enjoyed her afternoon in Amherst, and being around humans wasn’t so bad, if it was Meredith or Nicholas.

Chapter Twelve

Nicholas was true to his word, and Kyra's sword training intensified as time went on. They used wooden swords to practise. In the mornings, he pushed her to work on her stance and posture, teaching her how to attack, parry and block. Sometimes, they ate breakfast together afterwards. In the evenings, when she was done helping Catarina with her bedtime routine, she leafed through the swordplay book, absorbing as much as she could – sometimes in Nicholas's room, where she could ask him questions. Unknown to Nicholas, she began to see it as training of a different kind: training to help her kill Rhydian. A dagger could be messy, but if she mastered swordplay, she could do it cleanly – and overpower him if he fought back.

One bright morning, he was pushing her particularly hard, challenging her to parry his every strike – something she was poor at. He pushed her back to the far reaches of the courtyard until they hit a wall – wood clattering against wood.

When they reached the wall, he was so close she could feel his breath on her face, his wooden sword almost at her neck. The top button of his shirt was open, and she could see his pulse beating at his neck erratically.

"You need to bring it up faster to defend yourself," he said breathlessly. He touched her hand, lifting her arm so the side of her wooden sword met his. All she could think about was the feel of his hand, hot against hers. Their waists were almost touching. A rush scorched through her when she imagined what it might be like, to have him pressed against her.

"Back to the centre," he said gruffly. "We'll go again."

"Good," she said lightly. "I like the way your hair looks when you push me hard."

He snorted. “You’ve said that before.” He scraped a hand through his hair and shook it out, grinning at her. “Why don’t you come over here and run your fingers through it, get it over with?”

“Best not. I might not be able to stop.”

He winked at her, and her insides jumped.

They continued like this for some time, close to an hour. Every time he pinned her against the wall, she felt the same fizzing rush at his closeness. What was *wrong* with her? He was too distracting. And she hadn’t slept much due to Catarina being unable to sleep – she was having nightmares about Aunt Ruth – and demanding they bring her Lumen tea and some biscuits.

“Your posture’s wrong,” Nicholas said. He lowered his sword, moving towards her, pressing his hands onto her shoulders. “Like this.” His fingers brushed the bare skin of her neck and collarbone, and she hitched in a breath. His touch was like lightning, sparking across every part of her. His breath fluttered in her ear when he said, “Good. Now, try to hit me again. Come on. If you manage it, you can even have my helping of pancakes this morning.”

“You tease,” she said. Human food hadn’t impressed her much at first – then she’d discovered some foods she *really* liked, and pancakes drizzled in syrup were among them.

Kyra stumbled a few more times as they carried on. She was nearing exhaustion – sweating and panting – when Nicholas backed her into a corner once more, and she stumbled and fell. Her hand glanced across a sharp, broken stone at the corner of the stone steps. Her palm was sliced into, and a thin line of blood pooled into it.

Nicholas swore and knelt down beside her, grabbing her wrist. “Are you okay? Here.” He reached to pull the edges of his shirt from where it was tucked into his trousers, giving her a flash of his tanned stomach. She swallowed.

“What are you—”

The ripping sound cut her off. He tore a strip of the shirt’s fabric right off, and began tying it around her hand.

“It’s not that bad a cut,” she insisted. “It isn’t deep.”

“Come with me,” he said. “I have some bandages in my room, and we can clean it. We don’t want it to get infected.”

“I’m sure it’s fine, Nicholas.” She’d had worse injuries during her time as a merchant’s guard, and while training to become a warden. She was feeling too hot though, right around her neckline.

“For now it is.” He helped her to her feet, insistent, his closeness making her head spin. “We still have some time before you need to be back with Catarina, so let’s finish up sparring today and clean this up.”

“Alright.” There was more blood oozing out than expected, so dressing the wound was probably wise.

Heading back inside, they went to his room at the north-eastern corner of the estate. The clouds had cleared somewhat, and sunlight was spilling into the halls and stairways. A servant was watering plants set into white vases along the hall, and nodded at them as they went inside.

Nicholas’s room was large, with a living area in the centre, all white and silver with the occasional gold accent. Curved seats were dotted around, along with low glass tables, and there was a tall, grey marble fireplace decorated with golden candlesticks and a vase of white roses. A curved white counter was positioned in the corner, the shelving units behind it stacked with green bottles and glasses.

Nicholas suggested she sit down and went to the bathroom, returning with two small bottles and some clean cloths and bandages, as well as a small basin.

He took to the seat next to her and said, “Hold out your hand.”

She did so, and he took it gently, palm-up, before unwinding the ripped shirt. It stung, and she hissed in a breath as he muttered, “Sorry.” He screwed up the shirt fabric and flung it in the basin, before opening one of the bottles and dousing a cloth in liquid. “This might sting, too. It’ll help clean the wound and promote healing.”

She nodded, finding that she trusted him. “You ruined your shirt,” she said lightly.

“I have plenty more.”

A maddening urge came over her to suggest he may as well take it off – how would a human male’s chest compare to the chest of a Mer? She shook the thoughts off. She had a contract to keep, and he’d forget about her when that was fulfilled anyway. There didn’t seem much point encouraging something between them, even if she wanted to.

The intense sting across her palm distracted her, and she cried out as he made to clean the wound. He’d barely touched her when a horribly familiar

sensation came over her.

Pain, all over her body, like daggers into her skin – and scorching heat. And a stretching feeling, her legs elongating, twisting, her ears being reshaped.

She was turning back into a mermaid!

"Wha… What…?" she choked out, trying to ask him what was in the bottle. The pain eclipsed her words. She tried again. "What was in that bottle?" Levina's words cut across her mind like a shark's fin: *if you're splashed with saltwater while in your human form, you'll become Mer again*. It must have been saltwater!

She heard a smash – Nicholas dropping the bottle? – but she could barely think. She felt like a fish having its insides torn out and stuffed back in. Blackness swam at the edges of her vision; she gripped reality as hard as she could. She couldn't faint, not here. She needed to escape – when he saw her, he'd run and fetch the others, and she was done for. Her mind veered to her schooling, of history lessons teaching that if mermaids were caught, they'd be put on display as curiosities, or sold – humans would never believe they were one and the same, once, like her sister had.

Fresh agony seared through her body and she moaned, curling in on herself. She hadn't even noticed she'd dropped to the floor until now.

Have to get away.

Through the darkened vision, she could see her tail, already sprawled on the floor, the scythe-like tip flapping uselessly. Her trousers had been completely torn, tearing apart to make way for her tail; she still wore her blouse and cross-body bag.

She'd dry out here. She could breathe fine underwater and out of water, but if she dried out, she wouldn't be able to move. Pushing through the pain, she tried to drag herself away from Nicholas.

The agony ebbed as the transformation completed. Her vision cleared. Still, she tried to haul herself away, her claws scraping the floor, but it was no good. There was nowhere to go.

And then Nicholas was kneeling in front of her.

Chapter Thirteen

"You…" Nicholas breathed, staring at her. His mouth was hanging open and she couldn't decide if he was looking at her with horror – and the intent to make her a curiosity – or awe.

She was shaking. She hadn't trembled like this since she was a child, when she strayed too far into shark territories and Einar had to come save her.

"Don't be scared." He reached up, and she flinched back from him, sickened by her own fear. Her hair fell over her face. She couldn't stop these shakes, couldn't muster up the courage to fight him. "Wait… have I seen you before? I thought I had… after…"

She couldn't speak.

"What do you need?" he asked softly. "You can't stay here like this. You need the water. Don't you?"

Her head snapped up. What was he *saying*? The words got stuck in her throat.

"Shall I get you to the sea?"

The words pierced the fog across her mind. The sea. If he took her there… Should she go back? She hadn't even accomplished what she set out to do, and if she admitted failure, she'd belong to Levina.

She looked up at him. Her torn trousers lay scattered around her, ruined by her transformation. She recoiled and crossed her arms over her chest when she realised how exposed she was – despite the blouse. Her glittering blue scales would be visible at the neckline.

A pink blush worked its way over Nicholas's cheeks. "Tell me how to help. Do you need the sea?"

She shook her head, the haze and the shock clearing. *Think!* For now, she would see how this unfolded, find out whether he intended to betray

this secret. He loved the sea; maybe he didn't have bad intentions. Sea Mother, she hoped that were true. If he remembered her, he wouldn't betray her… would he?

"The bathtub," she croaked out. "Fill it, please. Warm water. No salt." She could drink a potion, but right now, she wanted the cocooned safety of water to clear her head before she turned back. She also didn't want him to see her transform again – or to be so vulnerable and defenceless while it happened.

He nodded, and padded away into the bathroom. She remained where she was, trying to gather herself and listening to the water filling the tub, which seemed to take a century. Her tail was horribly dry, sticking to the floor, her ear-fins drooping with the lack of water.

When he returned, she hesitated. How was she supposed to get to the bathroom by herself without legs?

Understanding flickered across his face. "I can carry you," he said gently.

Shivers ran up her back and neck. No human had *ever* touched her as a Mer. She couldn't help but wonder what it'd feel like; his hands were always so soft. Her agreement got caught in her throat, so she nodded instead.

He knelt beside her, his woodsy scent engulfing her senses. He reached out and hesitated, not seeming to know where to place his hands. She was clasping the towel to her chest. Tentatively, he cupped a hand at her bare back, and slid the other beneath the lower half of her tail – she shuffled it upwards to allow him a better grip.

When his human hands touched her fin, they were warm. It wasn't unpleasant. It was like dipping into a heated pool. A current ran through her, another shiver.

"Are you cold?" Nicholas said huskily.

"N-No, I'm fine."

"Okay. Here we go."

With a heave, he lifted her. She clamped down on her lips to avoid squeaking in surprise at his strength – her tail wasn't exactly light. Slowly and steadily, he walked with her to the bathroom, turning on his side to get them both through the door.

The bathtub had golden clawed feet, and was filled to the brim. He'd added something to the water to create bubbles that frothed up over the rim

like clouds, and a sweet scent hung in the air. The marbled floors and walls were covered in a haze of steam.

“I didn’t think you’d want me staring,” Nicholas said.

The gesture was so kind, and she was so relieved that – so far – he hadn’t reacted badly, that she was surprised to find tears pricking her eyes.

“Could you…?” She tugged at the looping chain of her bag, yanking it partway over her head.

He nodded, guiding the bag over her head and dropping it onto the marble surface next to the sink. Nicholas lowered her into the water with the care of someone dealing with an injured animal. He didn’t seem to care when his own clothes became covered in bubbles, or that he had to get his sleeves wet. Her white blouse swelled in the water, almost transparent, and she was grateful for the bubbles.

The water was a balm to Kyra and she made a humming sound of delight as he let go, leaving her to float for a moment before she hit the bottom of the tub. It wasn’t the sea, and her tail was poking over the edge, but it was good to be in water again.

“Thank you,” she said again.

“You can drain it and dry off when you’re ready. I’ll go to Catarina—”

“What will you tell her?” Kyra said quickly, with a stab of fear.

“That you fell over and grazed yourself, and I insisted on tending to it, so you’ll be slightly late for your duties today.”

She stared at him. It wasn’t what she’d meant.

“Kyra.” He held her gaze. “I won’t tell anyone right now. I do think we need to talk. I need to understand what’s going on here. You came here right before Ruth died, and if you know something…”

She was silent for a long while before she nodded. It was as good as she was going to get. But would he keep his word, and keep her secret?

The tailor was scheduled to visit the estate for a wedding dress fitting for Catarina – and Kyra and Meredith needed to attend. Kyra had already been dreading seeing Catarina in a wedding dress when her sister should be here wearing one. And now there was an unpleasant swirl to her stomach, because Nicholas knew what she was. She hadn’t been here long, and already she’d ruined everything by letting her secret slip.

He’d left her in privacy to dry off, and he hadn’t returned to his room. Kyra had taken one of the potions from Levina and turned back into a

human before going back to her own room, dressing, donning her bag and heading for one of the estate drawing rooms. The witch had been right – transforming still hurt, but her body was getting used to it.

When she arrived at the double doors to the drawing room, which were painted white, she knocked, and a voice called, “Come in!”

The door creaked as she pushed it open, revealing a room with pale-green walls, red carpet and leafy plants in huge vases everywhere. What she saw made her freeze in the entryway.

She hadn’t expected Catarina to be wearing the dress already.

Catarina was standing on a footstool in the middle of the room, framed by a set of windows draped with red curtains. She looked like a white rose amidst the red and green. The dress had a delicate floral design, hugging the top of her chest and neckline, and was cinched in until it reached her waist. There, reams of gossamer fabric formed a skirt that looked like something from a dream, spilling over her hips and legs and falling to the floor.

“Kyra, you weren’t here, and I couldn’t wait any longer!” Catarina said, giggling and spreading her arms. “What do you think? Isn’t it *stunning*?” When she moved, the fabric of her skirts shone like glass. Her blonde hair was coiled on top of her head, and she was wearing something shimmery on her eyelids to match her dress, the colour of pearls. “Oh, I wish Aunt Ruth were here to see this,” Catarina added, her mouth turning down. “I feel so terribly guilty that she isn’t.”

Pearl. Kyra’s chest hurt, and the air was stifling. She was aware she needed to speak, or walk further into the room. Minutes went by. Her foolish human feet seemed to be moored to the threshold.

“Kyra?” Catarina prompted. “Say something!”

Meredith hurried over to her and pulled her into the room, closing the door with a snap. “Kyra’s probably tired from her training – she had a fall, after all,” she said. “The dress is gorgeous, miss. Aunt Ruth would love it.”

“Oh, no doubt,” said Catarina, patting the hair gathered at the back of her head and smiling. “It’s fabulous!” She swayed, making the skirts dance.

The tailor giggled. Kyra hadn’t noticed her – an older woman standing in the corner of the room and assessing the dress. She was plain-looking, but there were pearls at her earlobes. Why did *everyone* around here wear pearls? Kyra wanted to crush them in her fist until they were dust.

Another laugh. There was someone else in the room, too. Penny, lounging on a nearby seat and weaving a tassel from one of the pillows

around her fingertip. Her dark hair was loose and flowing down her back, a glittering hairband holding it in place.

"Oh, look, it's the useless handmaiden!" said Penny. She snorted. "No more useless than Meredith, I suppose. I hope you won't be spilling anything today – not near Catarina's gorgeous dress."

"Hello, Penny," Kyra said shortly. She would not rise to her barbed words.

"Penny wanted to see my dress," said Catarina. "Her mother owned a wedding business, you know! She has such *darling* taste in jewellery. She's been helping me pick out a few things from Duke Turner's business."

"Are your other friends coming to see your dress, my lady?" the tailor asked Catarina.

"A few of them will be here shortly. Not all of them – I don't want to ruin the surprise for everyone!"

"Rhydian's not coming?" Kyra said.

"Oh, goddess above, no. It's bad luck for the groom to see the bride in her dress before the wedding. Don't they have that tradition in Orinthia, Kyra?" She saved Kyra from having to answer when she continued, "He *is* going to help me break in my wedding shoes in the ballroom early this evening. I'll only need one handmaiden to be there. Meredith can have the evening off. You'll come with me, Kyra, since you were late this morning."

Kyra nodded. If she could get Catarina out of the way somehow, and be alone with the prince… It seemed more urgent she kill the prince and leave here quickly, now Nicholas had seen her true form. She wasn't sure if he'd tell anyone her secret.

When evening came, Kyra escorted Catarina to the ballroom for her dance session with Rhydian. The room was dazzling, even more so than the rest of the estate. It was palatial, with a crystal chandelier aglow in the centre of the room. Every inch of the ceiling was painted with landscapes – rolling hills, fields filled with flowers, the sea crashing against a white shore. And in the middle of it was a blazing sun, encircled by a pair of delicate yellow hands. The rest of the room was plain – shining wooden floors, red stools pushed to the sides and a grand white piano shining in a corner.

"He's late," said Catarina. She rolled her eyes. There was an affectionate flush to her cheeks, as if she were pleased she knew him so well that she could have predicted this outcome. "Kyra, would you go see where he is,

please? I'll wait here. Make your way to his room and if he's still there you can ask him to hurry."

Kyra nodded, leaving the ballroom again, her heart skipping at the potential this presented: of being alone with the prince. If he wasn't in his room, she knew exactly where to look.

She was making her way up a staircase when voices drifted down, one of them sounding like Rhydian's. The other she recognised as Princess Adelia's – his sister. Kyra had seen her at the girls' lunch in the estate gardens where Penny had tripped her. Kyra snaked to the top of the stairs and hid behind a balustrade to listen; they were out of her line of sight.

"—Mother is much happier," Adelia was saying. She had a manner of speaking that emphasised every syllable, each note flowery.

"I know she is," the prince said, and Kyra detected a hint of bitterness in his tone. "She reminds me every time she sends me a letter." He put on a high-pitched voice. "*Oh, Rhydian, I'm so glad you're not marrying beneath us, as I feared. Your father would be proud.* Our father wouldn't have cared, not the way she does."

Adelia snorted. "I still find it funny, that you fell for a maid. Aren't you always ridiculing the staff, calling them rabble?"

The prince was quiet for a long moment. "Shut up, Adelia."

"Aww, I see. Did Pearl melt your cold, princely heart? How special. It doesn't suffice when it comes to—"

"I said shut up, Adelia. I owe a lot to Pearl, regardless of who I'm marrying now. She changed me, and my perspective, made me a better person. Something this family could learn a lot from."

There was a silence from Adelia.

"Don't say a word to Catarina about this conversation," the prince hissed. "She knows Pearl is in the past. She's the future. I made my decision." His voice fractured on the last sentence, as if he wasn't sure of the choice. Kyra balled her fingers together tightly as he continued, "I grew up with Catarina. You *know* I've always loved her."

When Adelia replied, she sounded serious. "If you have *any* doubts about this wedding, I suggest you put them to the side. This is a good marriage. Two blue-blooded families joining together. Not only that, but it will be good for us financially. Pearl never could have contributed. The Darlington Estate has wealth going back generations. They can add to the royal wealth and help keep the kingdom prosperous."

“You sound like our mother.”

“She has a point.” Adelia hesitated. “You know I would have supported you, if you’d have chosen Pearl. I would have stuck up for you, because I wanted you to be happy. But you’ve made the choice now, committed to it and everything that comes with it. It’s too late to change your mind.”

“I know.”

“Catarina was always the most solid choice,” Adelia went on. “We always expected you to marry her. Pearl was a passing romance. It wouldn’t have lasted.”

Kyra’s lip curled. He had indeed made his choice. And he had no idea what he’d done to Pearl because of it.

“I wish you and Mother would leave this alone,” said Rhydian. “I’ve reassured you both countless times. Pearl is gone and this wedding is happening.”

“Good. I was concerned, when I heard you’d postponed the honeymoon. I thought you might be considering doing the same for the wedding.”

Kyra had no idea what a honeymoon was.

“I asked Catarina if she wanted to postpone the wedding at first, because her aunt died,” said Rhydian sharply. “And the honeymoon can come when we’ve dealt with her aunt’s funeral. It has nothing to do with Pearl. I don’t want to have this conversation again, Adelia. Leave it alone.”

“Very well. I’ve said what I needed to say.”

“I have to go,” Rhydian said. “I’m meeting Pearl…” He sucked in a sharp breath, realising what he was saying. A silence as heavy as death followed. “I’m meeting Catarina in the ballroom.”

Kyra straightened up – she had to reveal herself now, before they found her crouched here listening. She smoothed out her clothes and rounded the corner, finding them standing in the middle of the hall. Adelia’s copper hair was scooped up into a sleek bun on top of her head, and her emerald-green gown flowed to the floor, the neckline decorated with golden accents. Rhydian was wearing a plain white shirt, the buttons open loosely, and black trousers, his hair slicked back. He was wearing that seaglass necklace again. Kyra frowned, giving it a second glance – was it the same one? It looked silvery-white, like a star’s glow, but the cord was the same.

“What are you doing here?” the prince demanded.

“Your Highnesses.” She curtsied. “Catarina sent me to find you, my lord.”

Rhydian cursed.

“Think about what I said,” Adelia told her brother. “Put it to the side and focus on the future.”

Rhydian gave a stiff nod. His sister moved off down the corridor, and Kyra followed Rhydian back down the stairs, to the ballroom where Catarina was waiting for them.

When they arrived, Rhydian shoved the doors open and ushered Kyra inside. Candelabras were lined up in neat rows along the walls, casting an orange glow onto the prince’s clothing and hair. His seaglass necklace caught the light faintly.

“Rhydian!” Catarina cried, turning to face them. She’d been sitting on a stool, but she rose to her feet and swept across the room. “You look handsome, my husband-to-be. You’re late,” she added.

“Sorry, I bumped into Adelia. You know she likes to talk and gossip,” said Rhydian. “I couldn’t get away.” He failed to mention that Adelia had been gossiping about Catarina and Pearl. Kyra almost felt sorry for Catarina.

“That’s fine. While I was waiting, I realised we don’t have anyone to play the piano for us while we dance!” Catarina exclaimed. She puffed air into her cheeks and gestured at the piano. “I should have sent for a pianist, or someone else in the estate who can play…”

“We don’t need music,” said Rhydian, smiling at her gently. “Just each other.”

“You’re such a romantic!”

Kyra perched on a stool at the edge of the room as they embraced and began to soar around the floor. Catarina’s shoes were low white heels that winked in the candlelight like stars. She was wearing a plain white dress, with enough folds of fabric that it sailed behind her like gull’s wings.

Soon they were both out of breath and Catarina held up a hand, pressing it to Rhydian’s chest. “I’m getting sweaty,” she said. “Let’s take a break. I need some air. It’s far too hot. I’m going onto the balcony for five minutes.”

“Very well,” said Rhydian, running his hands over the piano’s glossy white keys.

“You aren’t coming?”

“I’ll be here waiting. I need to keep up my music skills,” he said smoothly, with a dazzling, white-toothed smile. “I want to play a piece for you at the wedding – in front of our guests.”

“You do?” Catarina practically melted, and clasped her hands to her heart. “Oh, that’s so sweet. You practise. I’ll be back shortly.”

Catarina swept away and pushed out of a set of double doors behind the piano. Kyra waited until the door clunked shut, holding herself casually, arms behind her back. She couldn’t believe her luck.

Rhydian began to play. His song trilled around the room, echoing off the walls and ceiling – an elaborate, rising pitch of notes that fell into one another in perfect harmony. She moved closer to him, near to his shoulder, feigning interest in the song. She had no weapon – but they were alone, and she could do it with her hands. If she did it quickly enough, she could be gone before Catarina came back.

Blood was roaring in Kyra’s ears, every inch of her skin hot and sizzling. When he turned back to the keys, she lifted her hands, intending to grab his throat and squeeze the life from him before anyone could interrupt, before she missed her chance—

One of the doors burst open.

Kyra spun, letting out a ragged breath. Nicholas was rushing into the hall, half his shirt unbuttoned, wearing loose trousers and a pair of slippers. He looked like he’d been getting ready for bed. There was a wild look in his eyes.

Rhydian jumped to his feet. “Nicholas? What’s the matter?”

“Someone else has been found dead, Your Highness,” Nicholas said.

Chapter Fourteen

Kyra wanted to scream – instead she clamped her hands together behind her back. An ideal chance to kill the prince, ruined.

"Who?" Rhydian asked. "Who died?"

"One of the servants," said Nicholas, glancing at Kyra, whose heart dropped like a stone. Did he suspect *her*?

"I'm going to fetch Catarina and take her to her chambers—" Rhydian began. Before he could finish, Catarina returned from the balcony, her heels clicking against the wooden floor. A rush of air flowed in as the door closed behind her.

"Nicholas?" she said. "What are you doing here?"

"Someone else has died—"

"Nicholas," Rhydian said in warning.

"*What?*" said Catarina. "Who?"

"A servant," Nicholas explained. "It seems to be in the same manner as your aunt—"

"I *told* you!" Catarina cried, and she stomped across to Rhydian, glaring at him. "I told you it was suspicious and you didn't believe me, even though you knew about Ruth's face being mangled!"

Kyra's lip twisted. Catarina wasn't stupid, despite being spoilt.

"Nicholas, please." Rhydian pressed a hand to the bridge of his nose. "Catarina has been hysterical enough about—"

"I'm standing right here!" Catarina shouted. "Address me as such! Hysterical? It seems I've been rather *rational*, actually, in light of this! The Officers of Light should be called to investigate this at once."

"They've been informed already," Nicholas told them. "One of the other servants found the body and I was close by, so they fetched me first. I spoke

to Rhydian's uncle, and he sent word to the officers via bluebird messenger, as a matter of urgency. They'll be investigating."

"They shouldn't have acted without my say-so!" Spittle flew from Rhydian's mouth, and his cheeks blossomed with crimson.

"They acted sensibly! The officers can investigate this properly, as they do with other unexplained possible crimes! Whatever is the matter with you?" Catarina demanded. "People are dying! This is no mere illness! It's something more sinister. Why can't you see that?"

"Cat, there's no point adding senseless panic to the situation, especially if there's been some kind of sickness spreading," Rhydian snapped, and he stalked from the room.

Catarina looked horrified. She hitched up her dress and followed him, her shoulders drawn back, tears gleaming in her eyes. "You can retire for the night," she told Kyra, as she left.

Silence fell as she was left alone with Nicholas.

"Do you think she'll be alright?" Kyra found herself asking. Catarina was caught up in Rhydian's toxicity, and she wondered if Rhydian truly loved her, or if he was marrying her to appease his family. Maybe he only thought he should marry her because he'd known her since childhood, and because of her bloodline. Did that mean he'd really loved Pearl? The conflicting thoughts made her head hurt.

"I'm sure she'll be fine," said Nicholas. He smirked. "Have you become friends with Catarina?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"Why don't you come to my room?" said Nicholas, glancing to the door. "I think we should have that talk now. And maybe some alcohol." He scraped his hair back from his forehead.

Kyra had been here long enough to know humans tended to gravitate towards "alcohol" when they needed to relax, or destress. She'd yet to try it herself, because she'd been so busy waiting on Catarina's every need. And they hadn't talked properly about… everything. She needed to know if he still suspected her. He hadn't told anyone about her, so that was a good sign, wasn't it?

"Alright," she said.

Nicholas's room was lit with candelabras and lamps, yellowy-orange light flickering off the walls. The curtains were open, showing the inky black sky

dotted with gleaming stars. When Kyra stepped inside, her eyes were drawn to the spot on the floor where she'd transformed. She fidgeted absently with the chain of her bag, running her fingers up and down the loops.

"Was it the same as before?" she asked slowly, remembering the conversation she'd overheard in the courtyard. *She had a warped face… twisted.* "The servant who died. Was her face…?"

"Yes, they said it was distorted. People are whispering about dark magic."

Her eyes widened, and she took a seat on the loveseat, sinking back into the cushions. Surely it couldn't be dark magic.

"Did you know them?" she asked him.

He shook his head. "I'm friends with some of the servants, but not all of them. I didn't really know them, but it's still awful."

"Nicholas, I'm not responsible for all this. You know that, don't you? You haven't told anyone about me, so you must do." She *assumed* it was true, anyway – someone would have hauled her away to a circus by now, or had her poked and prodded and experimented on. "I expected you to go running to tell everyone I'm Mer. Most people would."

"I've seen you before," he said, crossing the room to sit beside her. "I told you I recognised your face. I didn't remember exactly, not until I saw you transform in front of me. When the ship was on fire, and I ended up in the water… I tried my best to swim to safety. I'd been drinking. You… I woke up in the shallows. I saw someone beautiful – a woman with scales, and fins instead of ears." He leaned forwards, so close his scent washed over her. "I thought I was imagining it, I was drunk or feverish, delirious. But it was you. I realise that now."

"You weren't supposed to know. I couldn't tell you. Why didn't you tell anyone about me? You were acting like I came here and got people killed."

"I did wonder at first – were you responsible for these deaths? You came here around the same time. Maybe you were trying to kill me on the beach, not help me. I remembered someone touching my face, the singing. You sang to me. I opened my eyes and saw you, and there was this beautiful music…" He drew in a ragged breath. "I touched your wrist…" He reached out, brushing his fingers lightly against her wrist, making her shudder. "And you were gone, like an illusion. I thought I dreamt it for the longest time."

She swallowed, unable to speak.

“You weren’t using dark magic on the beach,” he said. “You weren’t trying to harm me. There was so much kindness in your face.”

“I…” she choked out. “I thought you were dying. I wanted you to be at peace.”

He took her hand in his. “Which is why I haven’t told anyone about you. I didn’t get out of the water by myself. I was too drunk. You pulled me out, didn’t you? You saved my life.”

“Yes…”

“And that’s why I trust you. Thank you.”

An unexpected lump of emotion rose in her throat. Everything inside of her was filling up, like water about to overspill. “You’re welcome.”

He squeezed her hand, then got to his feet. “What’s your poison?” Nicholas asked her.

Kyra tried to puzzle out the question. *Poison?*

“Sorry. They probably don’t have that saying where you’re from.”

“No,” she said, smiling, “they don’t.”

“I was asking what drink you want.” He made his way behind the counter, plucked out two glasses and set them on the side. “Do you want to try alcohol?”

“Given the circumstances, it can’t hurt.”

He grinned at her. Kyra concentrated on the details of the room as he made the drink: the goddess of light carved into the side of the fireplace, the arch-shaped bookshelves either side. All the volumes were white with curling gold lettering on the spines. Her head was spinning at their conversation. He remembered her; he knew who she was. He knew she was a mermaid, and hadn’t told anyone.

“Wine might be good, since it’s your first time,” said Nicholas. There was a clink as he pulled a bottle from somewhere. “This one’s sweet and fresh. Doesn’t taste very alcoholic. Take it slow. We don’t want you getting drunk on your first attempt.”

He poured pale-pink, sparkly liquid into two glasses, and brought one across to her. She took it. Nicholas took a swig of his wine, and seated himself on the loveseat again, swishing the liquid in his glass.

“I can’t believe it,” he said, shaking his head. “A mermaid. The sailors tell stories about you – no one believes in any of it. It’s superstition.”

Her lips quirked. “We like it that way.”

“Then why did you come here?”

“I…” She couldn’t tell him that. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“Not to you.” The words came out harsher than she intended them. “Sorry, I…”

He frowned. “You have your secrets. It’s fine, you don’t owe me anything. Especially when you saved my life. *I’m* the one who owes you.”

“You don’t owe me anything.” She took a sip of the wine. It tasted fragrant, like a sea peach, with a pleasant fizz – but there was a strong aftertaste that gave it a kick. “And I appreciate you not telling anyone about me. I imagine others in the estate would think I was going around killing people if they found out.”

He sighed. “It’s so strange. I’m more convinced than ever this has the markings of dark magic. Do you know anything about dark magic? Do they have it where you’re from?”

“Tainted… *dark* magic is forbidden in the sea. Anyone who uses it is exiled.” She wondered if one of Levina’s girls was up to no good when she should be collecting ingredients and resources for the witch.

“I see,” he replied.

“What makes you think it’s dark magic?” she asked him.

“Their faces, being so twisted,” Nicholas said. “And if someone is murdered with a weapon, you’d expect blood. There was a hole in the servant’s chest, no blood. She was *grey*. Papery. Like the life had been sucked out of her.”

“And there’s no…” She caught herself on the word *human*, but that didn’t matter now, did it? “There’s no… human ailment that could cause this kind of death?”

“Not that I’ve ever heard of.”

“Is there anyone here in the estate who could wield dark magic?” she asked him.

“I doubt it.”

“Not even a wedding guest? There are a lot of people staying at the estate in the lead-up to the wedding. You don’t know them all, do you?”

“No, I don’t.” Nicholas frowned. “It’s possible.”

“What do you know of dark magic?” she said.

He tapped the side of his glass, thinking. “Dark magic causes harm: it can curse, transform, steal and deceive. It’s illegal to use those kinds of spells here in Lumen. Magic should only be used in service of the light.”

“That’s similar to what we believe,” she said. Kyra took another glug of the wine to give herself time to think, and it burned her throat on the way down. He already knew she was Mer. Was there any harm in sharing a little more? “There’s a story in the sea,” she said. “When the Sea Mother birthed life, she collected the darkness of the ocean and kept it in a garden, where she could manage it and keep sea life safe from its taint. One of her first daughters ventured into the garden, stealing herbs and flowers to concoct spells and curses. That’s where tainted magic came from.”

“So all magic is bad to Mer people?”

“No, not quite. Some Mer are born with powers – to command air and sea, to enchant with songs. And sometimes siren song is used in potions and tonics to ease pain and suffering.”

Nicholas shook his head in disbelief, smiling. “Not all magic is bad here, either. There’s a famous university of magical arts in Elrune. But any magic causing harm is strictly forbidden in most countries – curses, hexes, that kind of thing.”

“I see.”

“Do you have any abilities? Of air and sea?” Nicholas asked.

“No.”

“You don’t?” He quirked a brow. “I would have thought you’d have magic.”

“Why?” she said, prickly at the suggestion.

“Well, you’re quite enchanting already, aren’t you?”

Her face warmed and she drank some wine so he couldn’t see her face, where she was fighting a smile. He’d taken the sting away from the fact that she’d never developed any powers when secretly, she always hoped she would.

“Does that work on other women?” she said.

“That one was for you. I don’t flirt with just *any* woman. Only Mer women.” He winked.

“That’s flattering – how many of those have you met?”

He grinned at her.

Kyra took another drink. She could get used to this sweet fizzy liquid humans drank, and the tang it left on the back of her throat – and the flirting. She wondered if Pearl had been offered a similar drink here in the estate, if she’d sat in Rhydian’s rooms talking and joking like this. Rhydian had probably complimented her, flirted with her, like Nicholas was doing.

Suddenly, she felt as though she were repeating her sister's motions here at the estate, and it was like a punch to the chest.

"What's the matter?" Nicholas asked. He touched the crook of her arm. "You look upset."

"I'm fine." She blinked away her emotion. "It must be the wine."

"It's a lot to take in," Nicholas said gently. "You're new at the estate – new to working for Catarina, and to this entire world above the sea – and now all of this. It's understandable you'd feel overwhelmed. If you ever need to talk to anyone… You know I'm here."

The loss of her sister pressed down on her. Sometimes she felt she was caught in a fishing net, trapped with no way out.

"Wine can make people emotional. You don't have to have any more." He gave her a playful nudge. "Not if you can't handle it. Lightweight."

"Hey!" she said, breaking into a smile. "I can handle it fine."

"I'm kidding. You know, you don't seem afraid to question the royals or stand up to them. I've never seen any woman here at the estate fight like you do, either."

"You mean falling over my own feet?" she said.

"That's understandable. It must have been hard, getting used to legs," he said. There was a smile in his voice.

A laugh bubbled up, and she turned to face him. "Meredith says I should be more careful, watch my tongue, or I'll be thrown out of the estate."

"She's right. But there's nothing wrong with having a little bite. I think the prince – and Catarina – enjoy that, in a way. Just as much as they like taunting the meek servants."

"I'm glad you appreciate my… bite. I had sharp incisors before. Your human teeth are so blunt and useless."

Nicholas snorted.

They kept drinking and talking. Soon she felt light, and giggly, which was *not* usual. Her head was buzzing like the bees she'd seen in the courtyard. When she questioned Nicholas about it, he burst out laughing and said that was what happened when you consumed enough alcohol. She wasn't used to it, so the effect would be heightened for her.

Later, she told him she should probably head back to her own room. She stepped outside of Nicholas's doorway. The estate was quiet at this hour, the lights dimmed and the curtains drawn, throwing a cosy yellow glow against the walls and staircases.

“Thank you,” she said. “For not telling anyone about me.” The floaty feeling from the drink was still there and she had the urge to kiss him. She leaned towards him, noticing the closely cropped hair along his jawline, the olive-toned skin visible through his open shirt collar. What would a human kiss feel like? She was going to kiss him, make her feelings plain.

Instead, she stumbled and nearly tripped over her own feet, her teeth almost clacking together.

“Careful,” he said, laughing, and helping her straighten up. When she was steady, he shifted his hand to the doorframe, expression serious again. “Kyra, be careful – and I don’t mean tripping over. I don’t know what’s going on here at the estate, but I don’t like it. Although I know you can handle yourself.”

She nodded, still feeling unsteady on her feet.

“Get some rest. You’ll need to sleep off that wine.” He smirked at her. “Goodnight, Kyra.”

“Goodnight.”

He closed the door softly, and she made her way down the halls slowly, careful of her own legs.

Along the way, she paused. She’d been meaning to see this wellhouse Meredith had mentioned, the one the prince kept disappearing to. Meredith had said it was near the kitchens on the west side. She could go there now, to see, and maybe she’d be lucky and find the prince alone.

Kyra made her way to the west side of the estate, descending one of the staircases, holding on to the bannisters to be sure she didn’t fall – her head buzzed pleasantly from the wine. The entrance to the royal kitchens was tall and oval, with a huge white door with gleaming golden knobs. The other passage was more hidden, according to Meredith. She tracked back up the stairs, tripping halfway up, and peered around to see where it could be. She leaned over the bannisters for a better look, and it was dizzying and disorientating. A narrow pathway was tucked towards the back of the stairs, barely noticeable in the gloom and partially hidden by a huge column.

Glancing around to check no one was looking, Kyra moved down the stairs again and into the pathway, taking a deep breath to ease her light-headedness. Paintwork was peeling from the sides of the passage, exposing brickwork, and the marble beneath her feet was caked in grime. She followed the path forwards, and round a slight bend.

It eventually led outdoors, into a wild, square courtyard filled with untamed plants and low stone walls that were cracked in places. The fresh air struck her, refreshing, helping with the dizziness. The sky was cloudless above, blinking with starlight, but much of it was concealed by the overgrown trees. Branches stretched out haphazardly across the courtyard and she could barely see the paving slabs between the stretching weeds. It looked like nothing here had been trimmed for decades.

Curious, she pushed her way through the branches, breathing in the fresh night air, which helped to clear her head. The walls of the estate fell away, and a hill sloped down to reveal a brick structure, with an oval roof and an open archway leading inside. A rusty ironwork gate was pulled open; the inside of the structure was shrouded in shadow.

Kyra crept forwards, moving into the darkened archway. She didn’t have a light, so it was tricky to see much. When her eyes adjusted, she saw a huge circular well – and not much else. Just brick walls and more weeds.

Drawing back from the well, she frowned. What exactly was the prince doing, sneaking off down here when Catarina was tucked away in her room? She very much doubted he was smoking.

Chapter Fifteen

In the days to come, more guests began arriving for the wedding as it drew nearer, including the queen, the queen mother and her husband, and other members of the Harcourt royal family, who had travelled from the palace in the heart of Lumen. More guards were posted around the estate as high-profile visitors from across the kingdom and beyond were offered accommodation at the estate in preparation for the wedding. Levina's girls were still peppered about the estate, leering at Kyra and whispering reminders that she was on limited time – as if she needed them.

Kyra had progressed to real swords during her training with Nicholas now. One morning, Meredith decided to come by and watch – Catarina had taken to sleeping in even later, claiming she needed her beauty sleep before the wedding.

"You know, Nicholas is really taken with you," said Meredith, as they walked through the quiet estate to the courtyard. It was so early in the morning, only a few staff members and Royal Guards were dotted about the corridors and stairways. "He's never spoken to me so much! He keeps cornering me in the corridors. He was asking me about a Sunday trip to the village again yesterday. I wonder what Catarina would say, if you ended up marrying a lord?"

"We're not getting married!" Kyra blurted.

Meredith laughed. "Not yet."

"Not ever!"

"You don't like him?"

"That's not what I said," Kyra answered, frustrated. She couldn't exactly elaborate on the fact that she was from the sea, and when she killed the prince and fulfilled her contract, Levina would ensure everyone on land forgot about her. Meredith and Nicholas included. The thought caused a

spasm of pain across her chest; they'd both grown on her, and her feelings for Nicholas were stronger than she'd expected. "What about you?" Kyra deflected, as they descended a sweeping staircase. "Any progress with the kitchen boy?"

"He has a name! He's called Ansel… We've been talking. He asked me if I was going to the village this weekend… He said there's a park nearby, and there's a nice place to walk amongst the rose bushes…"

Kyra smiled. "Sounds romantic."

Meredith's cheeks blazed a fierce pink. "Don't tell Catarina! If she found out we *both* had our eyes on different men, she'd start panicking about losing both handmaidens at once."

"I won't say anything," Kyra promised.

When they left the estate, it was relatively cool out at this early hour, a breeze whispering through the trees and ruffling their hair. When they arrived at the courtyard, Nicholas was already there, and he raised a hand and called, "Morning!"

"Morning, Nicholas," said Meredith, waving at him. She perched herself on one of the top steps to watch, her knees tucked under her.

Kyra crossed to one of the trees, hanging up her cross-body bag as usual. She picked up her sword and stood in the middle of the courtyard, facing Nicholas. He already had a blade in his hands. He twirled his around, showing off, his teeth on display as he grinned.

"Think you can match the master with a real blade?" he joked. The sword whooshed as he wheeled it round in his hands, as though it were a toy.

"Be careful what you wish for," she said, holding on to her blade tightly and trying to remember everything she'd learned so far. "Maybe the student will end up better than the teacher."

"Let's see."

Meredith clapped in encouragement.

They dashed at one another, and steel rang against steel as they danced. Nicholas was quick on his feet, and she still struggled to control herself when moving so quickly – human feet felt clunky to her compared to a tail. He caught her blade with the side of his own and pushed it to one side, until his own weapon was pointing at her throat. He lowered his blade, closed the distance between them, and tenderly touched his fingers to her throat.

"I was worried I'd nicked you with it," he said softly. "Are you alright?"

“No harm done,” she replied, her voice husky.

“Again,” he said. “Be more nimble on your feet.”

She wanted to say he’d grown up with feet, and she hadn’t, but she bit back the remark and steadied herself.

They began again. She blocked several of his blows, and Meredith cheered and clapped some more behind them. When he sped up, she struggled once more to keep up with her own feet and stumbled backwards into a tree.

“You need to get better at the offensive,” he advised. “Try a riposte. Attack me right after parrying.”

He swung at her, and she parried, attempting to do what he’d asked. Steel clanged in her ears and she jerked forwards, launching her own attack at his shoulder. He twisted to block it, thrusting his blade against hers, and she felt the tension between them as they each pushed against the other.

“Better,” he panted. “Let’s go faster. Try to do it again.”

Exerting her energy, she tried to push him back into the middle of the courtyard. There was a patch of sunlight streaming in and she determined she could use this to her advantage. She drove him back into the light, where he seemed to slow as he squinted. She twisted her blade and stopped with it aimed at his throat.

He shielded his eyes and smirked at her. “Good. Using the environment to your advantage. It’s not exactly a… ah… *noble* thing to do. But I doubt any opponent would be concerned with being honourable. They’d be more concerned with killing you – or one of the royals – as fast as possible.”

She smiled faintly at his praise and lowered her sword. She moved forwards, brushing a finger over his throat. “Hope I didn’t nick you,” she said quietly.

“No harm done.” He grinned.

“That was amazing, Kyra!” Meredith called, clapping again, and adding a stamp of her feet for good measure. “Do you think Catarina would let me learn? She made me learn to ride a horse so I could accompany her on rides…”

“Maybe when she’s married, she’ll decide she needs two handmaiden-guards instead of one,” Kyra answered, laughing at Meredith’s enthusiasm. She set her sword in the rack and moved across the courtyard to take a seat next to her on the stone steps, catching her breath and shoving her sweaty hair out of her eyes.

“I have something for you,” Nicholas called to Kyra. “Hang on.” He deposited his blade on the rack and vanished around the courtyard corner.

“Didn’t he get you a gift in the village too? The swordplay book?” said Meredith.

“Yes,” said Kyra. “To help me learn.”

Meredith snorted. “He bought you tea and cake at the café. He keeps cornering me to ask about you in the corridors. And now he has another gift for you.”

Kyra smiled. She felt truly happy for the first time in a long time, and she hadn’t expected to feel this way in the human world. She was even growing used to this new body.

“I’ve seen the way you look at him – the way you are together when you’re sparring. You like him, don’t you?”

“I do.”

Meredith squealed like an excitable rabbit. “You two are *so* adorable together! Why don’t you tell him how you feel?”

“I was going to make it known to him how I felt, but I had too much wine and was acting foolish, and then we were busy with wedding planning, and I wasn’t sure I should…” She wasn’t sure why she was still hesitating. She supposed it was the knowledge he would forget about her soon, when she killed Rhydian. Could she make such positive memories with him, knowing they’d be erased on his end later on? Was that fair to him? Would it be too painful to her? Or should she tell him anyway, because it didn’t matter?

Footsteps announced Nicholas’s return to the courtyard, and they glanced up.

“Oh, goddess of light!” Meredith breathed. “That’s *beautiful*!”

She was referring to the sword clutched in Nicholas’s hand. The hilt was cross-shaped, solid silver, with three ice-blue gemstones running up the middle, and the blade long and thin like the ones they’d been training with. The hilt glittered in the sunlight, the gems catching the light and dazzling like moonlight on the sea.

Nicholas waved her over, and Kyra crossed the paving slabs to meet him.

“For you,” Nicholas said, when Kyra reached him. He held the weapon out to her.

“You’re giving this to me?”

“Of course. You can’t use a training sword forever. At some point, you’ll want the real thing for defending royalty. And they’ll want it to look appropriate.” He patted the hilt affectionately.

“I…” She lost her words. “Nicholas, you didn’t have to do this.”

He reached out and took her hand, pressing the sword hilt into her palm. “I wanted to. It’s a perfect fit for you.”

She gripped the weapon tightly. This gift, this treasure. How could she tell him she’d been planning to kill the prince all along, not to protect him?

She cleared her throat, feeling as though she was betraying him. “Thank you. It’s beautiful.”

Meredith was quiet behind them, letting the moment unfold. For Kyra, it was almost overwhelming. Her sister had been right, there were wonderful people above the sea. Now she could see that so clearly.

Chapter Sixteen

When Rhydian and Catarina's wedding day dawned, there were guards stationed at every corner, and the estate had been filled to the brim with white and yellow flowers in bloom. Correspondents for Lumen's main newspaper milled about the halls, interviewing guests and taking notes, and servants scurried about like mice, watering plants, cleaning and offering food and refreshments.

"Who has the rings?" Catarina said, for the umpteenth time. A flock of her friends and family members were already in her room, along with Meredith and Kyra, to help her get ready.

"Rhydian's cousin," said Lady Odelia Darlington, Catarina's mother. Like her daughter, she had a swathe of golden-blonde hair, scooped up into rounded shape. "Stop fretting, your father checked he had them last night. At least Rhydian has made sure there's enough security – those Officers of the Light didn't seem to have any idea what they were doing… no progress at all in their enquiries…"

"Rhydian didn't even want them here," Catarina said. "He still believes Aunt Ruth died of natural causes, so he's not exactly encouraging them to work harder."

"Don't worry about that," said Penny. "A few of the servants have… ah, quit, recently. There haven't been any additional deaths. I'm sure it was nothing sinister. The servants are always caught up on rumour. And you'll be well protected anyway."

"Let's talk of something else," said Lady Odelia. "It's your wedding day, Cat, darling – you need to enjoy the day, not spend it thinking about morbidities."

"Ready for your make-up and hair?" a friend said. "Then we can help you into the dress."

Everyone was already dressed in their finery – silken gowns and spilling skirts, hats with feathers protruding from the tops and the finest gloves. Even Meredith and Kyra had been given dresses for the occasion. Kyra wore a light-purple dress with a shimmering top half and a flowing mass of skirts, and her cross-body bag; the gold material was still appropriate for a wedding. Meredith was in pale yellow – an off-the-shoulder gown with dainty flowers stitched along the neckline and hem.

“No one make me cry,” Catarina ordered, as the girls laughed and rummaged around, pulling out make-up and brushes and getting her set up by the mirror. “I keep thinking about Aunt Ruth, and I’m going to ruin my make-up if I cry…”

Once her hair and make-up were done, she was helped into the dress. Kyra was less unsettled seeing the soft white fabric today, since she’d already seen Catarina wear it once. An ache throbbed in her chest. She’d always expected to see her sister settle down with someone one day.

A while later, a servant came to tell them that the guests – and Rhydian – were ready for them outside for the wedding ceremony. To Kyra’s annoyance, it was one of Levina’s girls: the black-haired woman who had stopped her outside her room. She shot Kyra a look and a smirk, and Kyra suspected she’d volunteered to come so she could taunt her. She did her best to ignore the woman.

Catarina pulled in a breath and glided to the door of her chambers like a swan floating over water. Her dress was so long, some of the girls had to hold on to the back. Her hair had been styled in elaborate waves, half of it pinned to the top of her head with a gold, sun-shaped clasp.

They escorted her down the grand stairs, and through the main doors, a couple of her friends holding the long, liquid-silk train of her dress. A path at the side of the estate led down to a huge expanse of gardens – gardeners had been working on trimming the trees and bushes back so they didn’t catch on Catarina’s dress, and the paving had been cleaned and swept until it was immaculate. The sun spilled over Catarina’s glittering hair ornament and made her red lips shine as she turned to smile at her entourage.

“You’re never going to do it,” Levina’s girl – the one with the dark hair – whispered in Kyra’s ear. She’d followed them outside. “We all know it. You’re too weak. A shame. Levina’s best girls are strong. She has no use for weaklings, save for cleaning up her pet eels’ mucus!”

Kyra ignored her, clamping her teeth down on her top lip. The other women were too busy chattering to have noticed their conversation.

The shrubbery parted. Another huge courtyard sat to the left of the estate building, surrounded by flower beds and bushes in bloom. More flower arrangements had been erected everywhere, standing proudly and sealed with yellow bows. White seats were lined up and filled with guests wearing brightly coloured hats with feathers. An aisle had been set up in the middle of the seats for Catarina to walk through, with a long white carpet running up the centre.

At the front of the aisle stood Rhydian, beneath a huge archway rimmed with white and yellow flowers and leaves. He wore a white suit to match his bride, and a golden tie. A giant stone carving of the goddess of light was erected behind him, her hands held up to the sun, as if he deserved to be blessed by any kind of deity. The queen stood beside him, her hands clasped together – her short grey hair was curled around her head like a halo, a shimmering golden crown resting at the front. Outside of Catarina, she was the most elaborately dressed person here, in a sweeping golden gown with an array of folds, long white gloves, and sparkling bracelets at her wrists to match the crown. There was an older man in white and golden robes between the queen and the prince.

Rhydian beamed when he saw Catarina arrive, and the queen smiled, reaching out to brush her son's shoulder. By the Sea Mother, Kyra was going to make sure he was cursed with the hand of death today, no matter what Levina's girls thought of her capabilities. She didn't care if he had been manipulated by his family into his choice of bride. He still had to die.

"Are you okay?" Meredith whispered under her breath. Catarina was making her way down the aisle, and they took to some free seats at the back.

"I'm fine. This dress just itches." She wondered how long the ceremony would last; the day was far too warm to be outdoors under the sun.

Meredith stifled a laugh. "I know. I actually wish they'd let us wear the drab servant's clothes instead. They're more comfortable."

White clouds rolled by overhead, bringing with them a cooling breeze. The old man in robes began to talk about the importance of the couple's commitment in the eyes of the goddess. The ceremony droned on, and the blessings of the goddess of light were bestowed on the prince and his bride-to-be. When the sun streamed down on them both, they raised their heads,

smiling, and the audience clapped. Some of the gathered family members cried – Lady Odelia was dabbing her eyes with a tissue, her face shaded by a wide-brimmed hat.

When the old man finished his speech, Rhydian and Catarina exchanged golden rings to represent the goddess binding them together.

“The goddess bless you both as husband and wife!” the man in robes called. “You may kiss the bride.”

Rhydian took Catarina in his arms and kissed her, swinging her round and dipping her close to the ground, making the audience cheer and Catarina giggle hysterically. Kyra clapped, as she was expected to; she didn’t stand up or smile.

When everyone was encouraged to go inside for food, drink and to dance well into the night, Kyra slipped in with the crowd and followed the throng inside, grateful Levina’s girl seemed to have disappeared. Meredith was close at her heels.

“What happens now?” Kyra asked her. “I heard someone talking about offerings to the goddess.”

“Yes, that’ll be later. After everyone has eaten their fill, drank and they’ve had their first dance. It’s customary for the guests to go outside during the fall of night and leave an offering for the goddess of light at the altar. When the goddess rises with the sun, she’ll bless the offerings, and the couple can take them into their new lives.”

“And after that, is the wedding party over?”

“Yes, I expect Catarina will go to the prince’s room after.” Meredith shook her head, a smirk playing on her lips and a pink tinge to her cheeks. “They’ll want her to do her part in keeping the Harcourt royal line alive as soon as possible.”

“How much have you had to drink?” Kyra said, glancing at her ruddy cheeks. “The wedding’s barely started!”

“Nothing! We should *not* drink while we work!” Meredith said, and giggled. “Shh!” She leaned over conspiratorially. “The servants got hold of some wine Catarina was gifted before the wedding. She threw the bottle away because she didn’t like it. I had some earlier – it was stronger than I thought!”

Kyra smiled back. Her mind was still on the fact that Rhydian would want to be undisturbed later. This could be her opportunity. Maybe Rhydian

would arrive at the room first, alone. She was tired of waiting – she'd expected to have this task finished before the wedding even happened.

The crowds went inside to gather in the ballroom, Meredith and Kyra following. A grand chandelier glittered over their heads. Tables laden with food fringed the room, and servants in matching silver suits and dresses weaved through everyone, offering drinks in glass flutes. The queen and the important royals had their own circular table in a corner of the room, sectioned off from the rest of the guests and draped with a golden tablecloth. A spinning, spiked sun hung from the ceiling above. Royal Guards stood either side of the table.

Meredith stood on her tiptoes to look over the sea of hats as a voice called out to the crowd.

A young man was standing on a stage erected at the top of the room, golden-brown hair tied back in a ponytail, his white tunic sparkling with coils of silver. "Hello, everyone – guests, Your Majesty, lords and ladies. I'm Cyrus Lockwood, bard! This is my lovely fiancée and songstress Annice, and this is Bellamy, master musician! We're here to entertain you this evening and to celebrate the royal wedding."

The female singer beside Cyrus took a bow, flicking her short blonde hair over her shoulder before she spoke. "We'd like to extend our thanks to the royal family for inviting us here this evening, and to congratulate the newly married couple!"

The other performer, Bellamy – who had a huge, rainbow-coloured feather sticking out of his hat – waved vigorously and tipped his hat. "Congratulations, Prince and Princess Harcourt!"

The crowd cheered and broke out into scattered applause as the music started and Cyrus began to recite a poem in time to the plucking of strings. The queen clapped politely and demurely from her table.

"Oooh, it's a troupe of musicians!" Meredith said. "And one of them is *handsome*!" She giggled. "I wonder if Ansel is here, or in the kitchen. Do you think Catarina would mind if I looked for him?"

"Enjoy yourself. I don't think Catarina is going to be paying you too much attention tonight, so you might as well make the most of it."

"That's the right attitude for a party," said a voice behind her.

They turned and came face-to-face with Nicholas. Kyra's breath hitched when she saw him.

His suit was cream, silky and shone under the light, tiny silver vines running up the middle edges. A strip of dark floral fabric was wound around his neck and tucked into the suit, and pinned in place at the neck by an obsidian gem. The shirt he wore underneath was silver, like the stars, the collar poking out.

“You look beautiful,” Nicholas said to her.

Kyra seemed to have turned muzzy-headed, as if she’d had too much wine like Meredith. “Thank you,” she said, collecting herself. “You look handsome yourself.”

He grinned at her.

The woman in the troupe of musicians was singing now, as one of the others played a string instrument. Her voice was beautiful, filling the room.

Pearl had liked to sing too – they’d often learned songs together. This melody was almost the same as one of their favourite songs; there was only a hint of a difference. Kyra felt like she’d broken. She couldn’t do this, couldn’t be here, not while this music played. She took a flute from a passing servant to give herself something to focus on. Maybe she could leave for some fresh air?

“Excuse me,” said Meredith. “I’m a bit hungry.” She leaned in to speak in Kyra’s ear: “*You* should enjoy yourself as well!” She vanished into the crowd.

“Gorgeous, isn’t it?” said Nicholas, nodding towards the troupe at the front. “Must have been a wild morning for you today. I know a quiet balcony if you want to…?”

He must have read her mind. A guffaw of laughter nearby stopped her from answering. Rhydian and Catarina were moving through the crowd, greeting their guests, thanking them for coming, exchanging kisses and handshakes. A portly man wearing a suit that was bursting at his waist shouted, “May you have many children and give us a worthy heir to the throne!” He raised his flute at the married pair. His entire face was red, even his nose, and he gave a hiccup. “Catarina is far better than that *other* one you were fooling around with, Rhydian, lad!” he bellowed, with another chortle of laughter.

That other one. Kyra took a step forwards on instinct, her lip curling. She made to contract her hands into fists, to strike at him. Instead her flute glass shattered, shards flying everywhere and liquid splattering the front of her dress.

Cries of surprise rang out around her. She blinked through the haze of rage and looked down at the glass scattered about her skirts.

“Are you okay?” Nicholas asked, taking her hands. She’d chosen not to wear gloves – she hated the feel of them on her human fingers – and some of the shards had pierced skin, drawing beads of red blood.

The sting at her palms snapped her back to the present. The music and the chattering of guests had largely concealed her mishap – only a few guests around her had noticed.

Already a servant was swooping in to mop up the mess, saying hurriedly, “Don’t worry, we’ll get it!” He called to someone to fetch a sweeping brush so the new princess didn’t step on any shards of glass.

“Thanks,” Nicholas told the servant.

He guided Kyra by the elbow, towards a door between two tables of food. She barely noticed as he led her down the shining corridors. The man’s laughter was echoing around her head, his words a chant: *That other one. Fooling around.*

Nicholas took her to one of the bathrooms – further away than was perhaps necessary, but it was empty of wedding guests, and for that she was glad. Dampening some towels, he sat her down on a long bench in the middle of the room and began to pick the glass from her skin.

“This seems familiar,” he joked, his tone light. “Not that I’m advocating for you to keep injuring yourself, but I appreciate the opportunity to sneak off with you like this.”

She managed to smile.

“What happened back there?” he asked her.

“N-Nothing. I squeezed too hard.”

“You seemed very upset.”

“It’s been a long day.”

He kept his focus on the glass in her hands. “Is that all?”

Everything was unravelling; she was dizzy with it, and with his questions. She wanted to finish her task. Her feelings for him had made it complicated. If she started talking about Pearl, explaining she was her sister, she’d have to tell him everything, including why she was here, and what would he think of her? Could she tell him without revealing that she wanted to kill the prince for what he’d done?

Nicholas had removed all the glass from her hand, and he wiped the blood carefully with the damp towels. “Tell me what’s wrong,” he said

softly. “I might be able to help.”

He was so close to her it was overwhelming. She could kiss him now, if she wanted. There was no alcohol to make her stumble or act foolish this time.

“I’m going back to the party now,” she said. He was a good person. She was fighting with her desire to kiss him, and her burning shame at what she was here to do.

“Wait. Kyra, I—” Nicholas began. She was sweeping across the room and hurrying out of the door before he could stop her.

Chapter Seventeen

When Kyra returned to the ballroom, Rhydian was seated at a glossy piano on the stage, his fingers trilling over the keys, his music spilling around the room in a lilting melody. The audience was still, including the troupe of musicians, who were clustered in a corner of the stage to listen to him play. Catarina was watching him from below with tears in her eyes, her hands clasped together in front of her heart, her golden wedding ring shining in the light. All Kyra could think about was the chance she'd missed to kill Rhydian last time, when he'd been practising.

Rhydian finished to a roar of applause before joining his wife and sweeping her into a kiss – another round of applause burst out around them. More music, dancing and merriment followed. The newly married couple swept around the room during their first dance, gliding like birds locked in an embrace, the gleaming floor reflecting the movements of Catarina's dress. Several of Levina's girls came over to Kyra to sneer in her ear about how she'd never kill the prince at this rate, so she had to keep moving around the room to avoid their snide remarks. It only added to her shame, reminding her that Nicholas wouldn't want anything to do with her if he knew about the deal she'd made with the sea witch.

The offerings came next: Kyra followed the crowd outside, and they gathered around the altar. The queen took to the steps leading up to it, lifting her hands into the air, and the crowd fell silent to listen to her speak.

"My son has married well," she called to them. "The Darlington family are well respected, and Rhydian and Catarina have been friends since they were children. Prince Rhydian has finally chosen a worthy woman to spend the rest of his life with, something we've all been waiting for!" The moonlight glinted off her finery, and despite her hunched posture due to her age, she held everyone's attention.

Kyra couldn’t help but flinch; even Rhydian’s face fell. She remembered the conversation he’d had with Adelia, and how the queen had been concerned he was marrying “beneath him”. The queen’s words were a clear barb at Pearl.

“Catarina is a welcome addition to the Harcourt family,” the queen continued. “Someone the whole kingdom can approve of as a future queen. We appreciate any offerings you give them as they go into their new life together. May the goddess bless them both.”

There were cheers and clapping, and Kyra watched as everyone placed gifts at the archway, beneath the first pinpricks of stars. The sky was navy and twinkling. The collection of jewels, crystals, flowers and fruit baskets filled with lemons and star fruit grew, and finally everyone was done.

“Thank you!” Rhydian boomed over the heads of the crowd. He seemed to have recovered from the queen’s speech, but his smile looked strained. “We appreciate all your gifts!”

He was clutching Catarina’s hand tightly and her face was flushed with delight. Rhydian had removed his tie at some point, loosening the buttons on his shirt, exposing the black cord and the rainbow-hued seaglass pendant. Was he wearing something Pearl had made him at his *wedding*? And why was he switching out the pendants, shifting between the rainbow shade and the shiny white one? What did that mean?

“Now, we’ll take our leave of you!” the prince continued.

“Go and make those heirs!” roared the portly man from earlier. He could hardly stand up straight, and he staggered into a bush, causing everyone to roar with laughter. Kyra hadn’t so far had a desire to kill anyone but the prince. This man was coming close.

Ignoring the spectacle, Kyra made her way through the dispersing crowd, hurrying towards the newlyweds.

“Kyra!” Catarina said. “Where have you *been*? You’re meant to be *guarding* me and I’ve been looking for you everywhere!”

“S-Sorry, Lady Catarina. I mean, Your Highness.”

“I’ve told you, there’s nothing to worry about,” Rhydian told her. “You’re perfectly safe. We have our family and friends around us, so nothing will harm you. I promise.”

Catarina wrenched her hand from his grip. “I’m not a child. Stop speaking to me like I’m paranoid!”

“I’m not. I’m trying to get you to relax. It’s your wedding day and I want you to enjoy it.” He reached for her hand again, and squeezed it. Her expression seemed to soften, and she leaned into him, but she still looked uncertain, a crease between her eyebrows. The prince turned to Kyra. “You will guard our room tonight with several members of the Royal Guard. We don’t want to be disturbed on our wedding night, and I think Catarina will feel safer – given everything that’s been going on – if there’s more than one person outside. Go and wait there. I’ll send the other Royal Guards up shortly.”

Kyra resisted a sigh. This could have been her chance! If they’d placed her outside the room alone, and the prince arrived early, she could have slipped in and killed him, unseen. She couldn’t do that with other members of the Royal Guard present.

“Yes, Your Highness,” she said.

She headed to the estate’s entrance, and the prince’s rooms. Another chance had been snatched away from her.

When Kyra arrived at Rhydian’s chambers, none of the other guards had turned up yet, so Rhydian mustn’t have got around to speaking with them. She’d run to the kitchens on her way here – empty, since everyone was busy at the wedding – and grabbed a knife, in case Rhydian decided to show up before any of the guards, or Catarina, did. She didn’t want to miss *any* chance to kill him, even though it was risky. She was running out of time, so risks would have to be taken. She could hide it in her cross-body bag if the guards came; it was a small enough blade. On arriving, she pushed her way into the main room. She was sure she wasn’t meant to go inside Rhydian’s chambers, but she was strangely curious. Pearl had probably spent a lot of time here.

As a royal, Rhydian had several rooms to himself, and they were the most exquisite in the estate. She wandered through them – all garish, filled with too much gold and marble, and as unpleasant as his personality. In the main bedroom, the bed was the focal point, positioned between four columns, with deep blue curtains either side. The ceiling reflected everything below it like a pool, threaded with the gold and silver tendrils that laced their way through the walls. Someone had scattered white petals across the bed, and a white box wrapped in a ribbon sat on a table, two wine

glasses beside it. She wrinkled her nose at the sight. There was a balcony off to one side, and she could hear the shushing of the sea.

Kyra paced into one of the other rooms. A set of white bookshelves were filled sparsely, and a huge desk squatted in front of a window. A box was positioned there, crystalline, almost transparent. There was something inside.

Kyra's heart pulsed at the base of her throat. It was white, with a blue ribbon to mark the pages. It couldn't be.

She hurried over and lifted the lid, removing the white book. It was unmistakeable. Her sister's name was scrawled on the cover in black ink.

Opening the book, Kyra blinked. Her sister's journal!

Her eyes drank in the looping entries – new words from her sister, a gift she never thought she'd have, detailing her life at the estate. Most of it talked about how excited she was to marry and live amongst people, to see Nethervale. The entries darkened, her sister's handwriting becoming hurried, slanting across the page.

> *Rhydian's mother, the queen, has been whispering in his ear. She doesn't think I'm good enough for him, I know it. Things haven't been the same, since she started questioning his intentions and trying to find out if he intends to marry me. I've read her letters.*
>
> *Rhydian and I talked about marriage. I know he wanted to. His mother is confusing him…*

Kyra's fingers tightened on the book as she flipped through the pages – most of them were similar, about life in the estate, about his mother and some of the wider family's doubts about Pearl's suitability. She skipped ahead:

> *One of Rhydian's friends came to visit. Catarina. His mother encouraged it, obviously. They've known each other since they were children, and she's so beautiful. I'm worried he's having doubts about me. Veronica keeps repeating his mother's words to him – I've overheard them in Rhydian's rooms. None of them think I'm good enough.*

The entries went on in this way, until:

Coming here is something I longed for. It was hard at first. An adjustment. He protects me. He makes me feel safe. I hope he marries me. I hope the queen stops meddling, and Catarina stays away.

"Oh, Pearl," Kyra whispered, shaking her head. Why hadn't her sister come to her? Or was this just before she died? Maybe she hadn't had time to send Kyra a message, or she was too preoccupied dealing with the queen, Catarina and Rhydian.

Her head hurt. She flipped through more pages. The rest of the journal was blank.

Kyra rifled through the rest of the desk, opening the drawers. There were charts here that she didn't fully understand – images of the moon, circular nodes, lines. Some kind of map or chart. She didn't know what any of it meant.

In the other room, the door creaked open. Kyra froze. She lifted her dress and shoved the journal down the front of the ridiculous stockings Meredith had insisted she wear under her dress – the skirts could be slightly transparent, and the girl had insisted the stockings would help. They itched, but right now she was grateful for them, and for the hefty skirts.

She gripped her knife tightly. If Rhydian and Catarina were here, maybe she could get some answers before she did what she'd come here to do.

When Kyra peered around the corner of the door, into the main bedroom, she saw that it wasn't Rhydian or Catarina. It was Penny. Kyra frowned – what was she doing here? She held the knife behind her back and stood in the doorway.

"You shouldn't be here," Kyra said. "The prince and princess will be back any moment, as well as the Royal Guard. They want to be alone tonight. I'm sure you can appreciate why."

Penny started – clearly, she hadn't expected anyone to be here. Her eyes narrowed, and she pointed at the ribboned box on the table. "Catarina asked me to make sure her gift for Rhydian had arrived safely, as she forgot to mention it to you. What are *you* doing here?"

"My job. I'm waiting for them to return, then I'll guard the door all night, as requested."

Penny sniffed. "I see." Her eyes flickered to the office behind Kyra. "Have you been snooping in the prince's things?"

“No,” she said quickly. “I was curious about his rooms. It’s grand in here, isn’t it?”

Penny snaked across the room, and before Kyra realised what was happening, she’d shot forwards, and there was a sharp tip pressed against her own throat, close to cutting skin. She pulled in a breath.

“I’m not a fool,” Penny breathed. “I know exactly who you are. I won’t have you interfering with the plan. I’ve held my tongue with you so far, but I don’t trust you – and the fact that you’re sneaking around in here confirms my suspicions.”

The plan?

“How do you know who I am?” Kyra demanded. Briefly, her blood ran cold. “Did Nicholas tell you?”

She laughed. “What? How would he know? I hope you weren’t intending to share the sea witch’s secrets with him, Kyra – that would be naughty.”

The sea witch.

The realisation struck her between the temples. Penny was one of Levina’s girls, like Aylin and the others. She exhaled, relieved; Nicholas hadn’t betrayed her. But why had Penny kept it a secret? All the other girls had made themselves known to her – they jeered at her, mocked her, questioned her resolve to kill the prince. Still, they didn’t hide themselves away. Penny must have a more sinister reason for keeping her identity hidden.

“You’re not Catarina’s old friend,” Kyra ground out. “What are you up to?”

Penny laughed. “Of course I’m not. It was easy enough to make her think so, though. A pinch of siren-song powder, for both Catarina and that silly Meredith, was all it took. And Ruth was so stupid, she believed the whole story I fed her without any magic at all!”

Kyra spun in one swift movement, snatching at her wrist. The woman cried out, dropping her weapon, and Kyra bent her arm backwards until Penny screamed, and shoved her to the ground.

Penny tried to scramble to her feet, but Kyra was already on her, pressing her to the floor with her knees, keeping her arms pinned to her chest. Her own knife was now held at the woman’s neck.

Penny gave a choked laugh. “Don’t you recognise me, Kyra? I’m surprised you didn’t notice before. I suppose you’ve been caught up in your

own… ah… *task*. And I look slightly different in this form, without my scales. We've met, though, when you first came to see Levina."

Kyra's eyes widened. The light cast a glow on her face, where she could make out a pattern of freckles across her cheek. She recognised it, the zig-zag freckles matching the constellation of scales from her Mer form.

"Narissa?"

"In the flesh."

"Why?" Kyra pushed down harder as Narissa wriggled beneath her, trying to free herself. The chain of Kyra's bag was digging into her chest, but she kept a tight grip on the other girl. "Why are *you* here, and why have you been so secretive? Why the false name?"

Narissa laughed dryly, coughing when Kyra pressed the knife tip closer to her flesh. "The other girls were happy to keep my secret and let me use a false name. That way, I could keep an eye on you. They think you have no resolve – it's a game to them. I, on the other hand, don't trust you not to interfere with what's happening here."

They didn't have time for this – the royals and the guards would be back soon. "What's exactly *is* going on here? Are you involved with the deaths? Does Levina know about them? If you're using dark magic without her consent—"

A look of fear flickered across Narissa's face. "I'd die before I told you anything about that!" Narissa said, spitting at Kyra.

Levina's words flitted through Kyra's mind: *she has the tendency to be… disloyal at times. I keep her close, as you do your enemies.*

In a sudden display of strength, Narissa shoved at Kyra, toppling her to the side, and leapt at her, clawing at her arms, trying to pry the knife from her hands. Kyra held on tightly, crying out as Narissa's elbow clipped her chin in the scuffle.

They wrestled one another and rolled. Narissa slammed into the side of a loveseat with a grunt, and Kyra managed to secure her grip on the knife. She plunged it downwards. Narissa tried to roll away – Kyra spun and repeated the movement.

The knife plunged right into Narissa's stomach.

Chapter Eighteen

Kyra stared down at Narissa's limp body, at the patch of crimson on her dress. Guilt and panic were worming their way into her heart: she would have preferred not to kill Narissa, but she was sure Narissa would have killed her if she hadn't defended herself. Narissa was turning back into her Mer form as the life left her. Scales flourished on her face, and her ear-fins poked out from her dark hair. Her legs darkened and merged, becoming a sharp fin.

After the moment's shock passed, she leapt to her feet, heart hammering. Rhydian and Catarina would be coming with the guards. She didn't have time for this. A thought struck her: the shushing sound of the sea she'd heard earlier, when she'd entered the room. Grabbing Narissa, she hauled her over to the balcony doors and out into the night.

"Sea Mother be with you," Kyra said, and hauled her up and onto the stone edge of the balcony. She peered over the edge. Far below were the crashing waves of the sea, slamming against the cliffside and spraying them with white foam.

One push, and Narissa was falling. She hit the water with a splash, dress bubbling like a flower, then she disappeared into the dark depths.

Kyra raced into the bathroom to collect a scrubbing brush, soap and water, along with some towels, to wash away the blood from the marble floor.

She was throwing the blood-sodden towels over the balcony – weighted down with some rocks from the plant pots along the edges of the balcony – when the door to Rhydian's chambers opened again.

Wheeling round, Kyra plastered a smile onto her face. She was out of breath, but she tried to keep her breathing controlled and her face collected.

Rhydian and Catarina entered the bedroom – Catarina was giggling as she took in the huge bed and flower petals. Rhydian looked stony as he pulled off his tie and flung it to one side.

“I told you to wait outside!” he snapped at Kyra. “Get out there with the other guards at once!”

“S-Sorry, Your Highness,” she said, and gave him the sweetest smile she could muster up. “I… I thought I’d open the balcony doors to give you some fresh air.”

“Oh, leave her alone, Rhydian,” said Catarina, slapping his arm. “She’s trying to make it more pleasant for us. Kyra, you may wait outside now.”

Kyra nodded, gave an awkward curtsy, and left, her heart hammering so loudly she feared they might hear it.

She was forced to stand outside the prince’s chambers with the other Royal Guards until the morning. When someone came to bring the prince and princess breakfast, Catarina told Kyra to take the day off as she’d be spending it with Rhydian – and Kyra was grateful for the space. Kyra hurried back to her room, and hid Pearl’s journal under her mattress. Instead of staying in her room to sleep, she went to see Nicholas, knocking steadily on his door until he appeared, an unbuttoned shirt draped loosely over his shoulders, exposing a bronzed chest. A damp towel was draped around his shoulders, and his dark hair was slightly wet, strands hanging over his dark brows.

“Kyra,” he said, sounding surprised. “What’s wrong?”

Something was stirring within her at the sight of his chest, his dishevelled look and wet hair. He looked almost… vulnerable. It wasn’t how she was used to seeing people at the estate, usually dressed up in their finery.

“I…”

“Come in,” he said softly, waving her across the threshold and moving aside.

The room was tidy, save for a breakfast tray with a drained cup of coffee and a few items of clothing strewn across the loveseat. Nicholas pulled the towel from his shoulders and dropped it onto a corner of the loveseat with the clothing.

“Are you okay?” he asked, crossing the room again to be closer to her. He reached out, brushing his fingers against her arm. “I bumped into

Meredith, and she said you were guarding the prince's room all night."

"What? Oh, yes, I—"

"I didn't get a chance to ask you to dance with me at the party."

This startled Kyra so much, she struggled to find the words to get the conversation back on track to where she'd intended it to be. "You wanted to dance with me?"

"You didn't have a partner. I didn't see you dancing with anyone. I was going to ask you, but you smashed the glass, and I didn't see you again." His hands were still on her arm, and her skin was buzzing at the contact, and at the tender look in his eyes, as if she were a precious treasure. "Is that why you're upset? I know weddings can be hard for people sometimes, when you don't have anyone."

He thought she was lonely, or missing out? The word *lonely* struck her between the temples like a physical assault. Something clogged the back of her throat and she forced herself to swallow. Why was she getting emotional? Was it the way he was looking at her? Or was it because this was the first time someone had described the gaping hole in her life since Pearl had gone?

She tried to speak again; nothing came out. The backs of her eyes were burning with the effort of holding back her emotions. Before she could say anything else, he was leaning forwards, a questioning look etched between his brow. He hesitated, as if asking for permission – seeing if she wanted this.

And she found she didn't want to stop him. She'd never felt so *known*, so seen. She shoved her concerns about her deal with the sea witch, and why she was here, aside.

He was so close, a strand of his wet hair tickled her forehead, and she snorted, wrinkling her nose.

"Sorry," he said through a smile, brushing the hair away at the exact same time that she reached up to move it.

Their hands bumped awkwardly, and he caught her fingers, a questioning look in his eyes again. She leaned in and kissed him, taking his questions away. Human kisses were soft, less scratchy than Mer ones, almost spongy. It was… nice, and her skin tingled.

The kiss was brief, and he drew back, smiling faintly. "I'd hoped to do that after asking you for a dance, but I wasn't sure how you felt."

“It’s a good thing you didn’t ask. I can’t dance. I’ve not even been walking for long.”

He laughed. Her insides were fluttering. She’d never been this awkward with a Mer male. She didn’t know what humans *did* after they kissed, whether there was any etiquette involved. A kiss in the Mer world signalled genuine interest, and it looked to be the same here. Nicholas seemed relaxed, so she tried to mirror him and smiled back.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d want to be with a human,” he said. “It’s why I hesitated for so long, after I found out you were a mermaid.”

“I can’t say I have any experience with humans,” she said. “And I never used to be interested…”

“Ah, until you met me?” he said, chuckling. His eyes gleamed. “I’ll have to teach you.”

“You will.” She smirked and shook herself, the expression fading. She brought herself back to her original purpose for coming here. “I need to tell you something. I think I know what’s happening around the estate.”

“You do?”

She bit her lip. “Well, partly. There’s still so much I don’t understand.” Kyra fell silent, not even knowing where to start.

“Are you in some kind of trouble?” He moved closer, took her hand.

His touch made her feel as vulnerable as he looked. She hadn’t been treated this way since Pearl was alive. Most of the Mer men she’d been with romantically, they were harder – coarse, like rockfaces ebbed away by harsh waves. Nicholas wasn’t like that; he had empathy, compassion.

And he hadn’t betrayed her. He hadn’t told anyone who she was.

“Penny,” she whispered. “She was Mer. Like me.”

He stilled, but didn’t remove his hand from hers. “What? And you didn’t know?”

“Sit down,” she said gently, and sighed. “I should probably start from the beginning. I didn’t want to tell you all of this at first. But you’re the only one here I can trust.”

“Of course you can trust me.” His hand tightened on hers. He sat down on the loveseat and gestured for her to continue.

Taking a deep breath, she told him what had happened. How she’d come to the estate with the help of the sea witch. She left out the part where she’d come here to kill Rhydian, and everything involving Pearl. She didn’t want to entrust those secrets to him yet, especially not after their kiss. He thought

well of her, and she liked him. If he came to hate her… An ache spread across her chest at the thought. She did tell him what had happened to Narissa – how she'd given her no choice.

When she was done, he uttered a stream of curses. "Penny… I mean, Narissa… *why* would she want to do this? Being involved with something like this, right under everyone's noses – that's a huge risk."

"I know." Kyra's skull was throbbing and she pressed a hand to her forehead. "I don't know. I think I need to go to the sea witch. She might not even know this is happening. Narissa kept saying *the plan* but if she's involved, I don't think she'd be doing it alone. She must be working with someone else, and she looked afraid when I mentioned Levina. Maybe Levina doesn't know what's going on here."

"So Narissa could have taken some of this witch's magic and brought it here?" Nicholas surmised.

"It's possible. Narissa was one of her best girls."

"Do you think it fell into someone else's hands somehow? Someone at the estate?"

"Could be. I need to talk to the sea witch about Narissa. I have enough potion to transform a few more times."

He stood up, shaking his head. "Kyra, are you sure it's safe? We have no idea what all of this means. I don't like the idea of you going to confront Levina alone. What if she's involved with this?"

She gave a one-shouldered shrug. "I have to do this alone, and I have to do it today. Catarina's given me the day off."

"If you aren't back by sundown…"

"I will be, I promise. I'm going to talk to her, it'll be fine." The chances were, Narissa had betrayed Levina, and the witch would be furious when she found out.

Nicholas took a step towards her, pressing his hands onto her shoulders and leaning in for another kiss. She sank into the soft, lovely feeling, her lips moving against his – she could get used to this.

"Come back safely," he said, when they broke apart. "Remember, I have sailor friends, so if you aren't back, I'll be sending out a search party."

"I'll keep that in mind," Kyra said, smiling.

"And Kyra?" he said. "I'm sorry you had to do that back there – with Narissa."

She nodded slowly. She squeezed his hand and gave him one more kiss. “Nicholas,” she said. “Do you have a box that’s watertight?”

Kyra wasted no time. She took the box Nicholas had given her to her room at the estate, and stuffed her sister’s journal inside. She didn’t know what was going to happen tonight, and she wouldn’t leave it here. Once it was secure, she left the estate and headed down to the shoreline. Her cross-body bag was strung over her shoulder, so she could turn back into a human when she was done in the water.

A half-moon hung overhead, visible in the summer sky and dusty against a scud of clouds. The crystalline waves were lapping against the shore when she arrived at the water’s edge, filling the beach with a gentle hushing sound. The bushes and trees were rippling behind her, rustling in the breeze. Despite everything, there was an exhilaration rising in her chest, bubbling up. She was going *home*, even if only briefly. She removed her clothing and tucked it, along with the box containing the journal, in the deep hollow of a tree, keeping only the bag with her.

She returned to the beach and dived, plunging straight into the cold water.

The pain of her transformation back into a mermaid was briefer this time – a flash of agony through her bones and her skin, like lightning. When she hit the frothy waves, her fins stretched out, her ear-fins elongating, the scales popping up on her face. Her legs came together, merging into a long sharp fin that beat against the water as she swam down.

The initial, joyous feeling of being back to herself faded when she realised it felt strange. She’d grown used to her legs, and now the push of her fin was foreign to her, which she hadn’t expected.

It didn’t take her long to swim down to the entrance to the Lacuna, and make her way to the cave entrance. It was quiet down here – she found Fisk patrolling the entrance, holding his trident, but the sea snakes were gone.

“Kyra,” he said coldly. “I heard what happened, that you went to the human world. The girls were talking about it.”

“I…” She didn’t like his coldness – he’d cared for her and her sister, and she’d thought highly of him as a child. She was doing what she had to do. She steeled herself. “I know you don’t like what I’m doing, but I need more transformation potions from Levina,” she lied. “I went for a swim this morning because I missed the water. When I got back, I couldn’t find my

potions. I think they got swept away by a wave. She told me she keeps some stock in her cave."

Fisk frowned. "She isn't here. She took the sea snakes and most of the girls to Serpent's Point for training."

That scuppered her plans. Maybe it was for the best. Nicholas's words emerged at the forefront of her mind: *What if she's involved with this?* It couldn't hurt to poke around while the sea witch was absent.

Kyra made a point of cursing and pressing her claws to her head. "I need to turn back into a human today! I was only meant to be gone a short while and they'll start wondering where I am. Could you let me into her cave to find it?" She forced the words out in a rush, as if she were desperate, and swam closer.

"I don't know, Kyra – she doesn't like anyone snooping around when she's—"

"I'm not snooping, I promise. I need to find some of that potion." She forced her voice to wobble, tipped her head down so her hair fanned around her eyes. She hated herself for using his emotions against him, but it was the only way. "I've already failed to kill the prince so far, Fisk. I can't keep failing at this, I need to make it happen. For Pearl's sake. You were right – I never should have got involved with dark magic – but it's too late. Killing the prince is the only way I'll be free of Levina now. If I fail, I'll become one of her girls. If I succeed, she'll let me go, and I can live my life."

"A life in exile," Fisk said shortly.

"What other choice do I have at this point?"

Fisk heaved his shoulders; there was a sympathetic crease to his forehead. "Very well, you can go in. I won't tell her you were here. Be quick about it." He jerked his clawed thumb over his shoulder. "And Kyra – I suggest you kill the prince and get far, far away from the Lacuna. There are better ways of living in exile than working for the sea witch. I wish someone had told me that before." His lips turned down. "It's too late for me to leave. It's not too late for you. Don't let Levina have control over you."

Kyra was silent. Did the sea witch hold a piece of his soul, too, making it impossible for him to leave her? "Thank you," Kyra said eventually. She reached out and squeezed his arm.

Before he could change his mind, she darted into the cave behind him, swimming the lengths of the winding tunnels and making her way to where

she’d found Levina the last time she came here.

There was a sharpened piece of wood that looked like it had come from a shipwreck, with a blade attached to the end, in a corner. For a horrible moment Kyra startled, thinking someone was in here, but the cave was empty – the makeshift weapon was leaning against a rock.

Kyra hurried across to the chiselled rocks, and the bottles and dead things in jars that were gathered there. Shells adorned the higher cave walls, stocked with Levina’s spells. There were other glass jars stuffed with scrolls – jar after jar of contracts made with Levina. She searched the alcoves, not really knowing what she was looking for.

Her claws clanked against something, and she closed her fingers around the hilt of a weapon and pulled it free of the alcove. When she saw what it was, her heart jumped into her mouth, where it felt like it turned to poison on her tongue.

The dagger the sea witch had given Pearl to kill the prince with.

She shoved it back into the alcove, feeling sick, and continued searching, pushing aside jars and bottles after she’d checked the contents.

Several alcoves across, the crevice in the wall became deeper, and she had to pull out jars and shift them out of the way to check the ones at the back. She tugged a glass jar from the furthest reaches, holding it up to her face. Inside the jar was a scroll, shining faintly. In the corner was the name *Rhydian Harcourt* beside a waxed royal crest.

Rhydian was working with the sea witch.

Chapter Nineteen

She had to take this scroll with her to show Nicholas. It was damning evidence that the prince was dabbling in dark magic. Kyra rearranged the bottles in the alcove so the gap she'd made was hidden. Hopefully the sea witch wouldn't notice. There were a lot of contracts here.

Kyra tucked the jar under her arm and headed for the entrance, where Fisk had his back to her. She swam past him at breakneck speed, so he didn't notice what she was holding, and called, "Thanks, Fisk!" as she passed.

When she returned to the surface and broke the waves, the sun was bearing down on her, hot, and the air was close. Reluctantly, she swam to the shore, making sure no one was around before she took the potion that would return her to human form, and pulled herself onto a rock until the process was finished. Her clothes were where she'd left them. Dressing hastily, she returned to the estate and went straight to Nicholas's room.

She expected him to be gone when she knocked on the door – at some appointment or other, or with his father. He opened the door in mere moments.

"Kyra," he said, and let out a long breath. "You've been gone a long time. I was starting to worry."

He moved aside to let her in. His shirt was buttoned now, and he'd added a grey jacket with silver buttons; his hair was brushed back and dry. Her stomach fluttered; he always looked good.

"What happened down there?" he asked her.

"Rhydian is working with the sea witch."

Nicholas frowned. "What? How would he…? Are you sure?"

She threw the bottle containing the scroll onto his bed and said, "See for yourself. There's his contract. I pulled it from her cave. She wasn't there."

Nicholas crossed to the bed, the crease still between his brows, and unstoppered the bottle, lifting out the rolled-up paper and winding it out. His face paled.

"What does it say?" said Kyra.

"It says…" He swallowed. "He made a deal with her. To allow her access to the estate and to provide her with souls. In exchange, she would leave his kingdom, and Catarina, alone. What does that mean? It also says he can never tell anyone the details, or he'll be cursed and transformed into a fish – permanently."

Kyra's head swam, and she stumbled onto the loveseat, breathing hard. "I knew something was off! He kept trying to tell Catarina people were dying of an illness, and all the while, he was involved. I don't think Catarina knows…" Kyra truly felt sorry for the woman now, strung along with his schemes. Her nails bit into her palms.

Nicholas joined her on the loveseat. "In Lumen, most people pray to the goddess of light. How would Rhydian even know about your… sea witch? How would he know how to find her?"

She frowned. "The servants kept hearing Levina singing. You've heard the rumours about a sorceress. He probably heard her, too, and she wormed her way into his life somehow. And if he's giving her souls…"

"Then he's behind what's going on," Nicholas finished.

"Yes. Levina's Mer girls must be involved, too. They're here at the estate. I always thought they were doing other tasks for her, collecting ingredients for spells. I was so blind! She isn't relying solely on him." Kyra hesitated. That was why Levina didn't care if Kyra killed the prince; she had others to do her dirty work for her. Not that she'd mention that part to Nicholas. "Rhydian's visits to the wellhouse make much more sense now, in any case."

He frowned. "I wish Meredith had been right about him just going down there to smoke – not all this."

"So do I. Why does the sea witch even *want* souls? And what exactly is Rhydian trying to protect the kingdom from?"

"I don't imagine it's anything good," Nicholas said darkly. "Does the sea witch know you went to her cave?"

"No. She wasn't there. And hopefully she won't realise that bottle is missing." Kyra gestured at the empty bottle, wedged in the bed coverings. "She had plenty of them."

“We have to find out what she’s up to – what they’re both up to. And we start with the wellhouse.” He clenched a fist. “Rhydian – I always knew he was bratty, mean even. But hurting people like this? People he brought into the estate, employed? They should have been safe here. And he hurt his fiancée’s *aunt*. Her family.”

“I know,” said Kyra softly.

“He can’t be allowed to get away with this.”

Nicholas was right. He’d hurt people, and it couldn’t continue. Or maybe she was only trying to justify her goal of killing Rhydian, so Nicholas wouldn’t be angry when he found out.

“Aren’t you leaving the estate soon?” Kyra said, the idea of it stinging. “The wedding’s over.”

“My father wants to stay for a while. He’s in talks with some of the royals about selling them some of his best pieces.” He paused. “I’m glad I get to stay longer. It means I can spend more time with you, although I wish it were in better circumstances.”

“There must be a goal to all this. What does Levina want?”

“We have to find out – we can start with why he’s visiting the wellhouse,” Nicholas said, standing up and pacing the room. “How often has Meredith seen him out there?”

“Quite a few times. Usually at night, after Catarina retires to bed.”

“We can tail him, then.”

“Tail…?”

“Sorry, I mean follow him – find out what he’s doing. Can you come here in the evenings when Catarina goes to bed?”

“I suppose so. Meredith might ask questions, though…”

He smirked. “Just tell her you have a suitor interested in you. Anyone would believe it, since you’re so beautiful.”

“I hope you’re prepared to spend evenings with me. Beauty is one thing – whether you can handle a Mer is another.”

“I’m doing fine so far,” he said, as she made for the door.

With her back to him, he couldn’t see the smile creeping over her face.

Kyra began spending her evenings at Nicholas’s room. It was well positioned for spying on the prince, as it was near the stairway leading to the wellhouse passageway. Nicholas was friendly with many of the servants, and he’d enlisted a few favours so they’d tell him when Rhydian

left his room at night. Apparently, he'd discreetly told them Catarina was suspicious Rhydian had taken up smoking again, and wanted to catch him in the act.

Nothing much had happened so far. Many of the senior Harcourt royals had left the estate by now given that the wedding was over – the queen included. One of the servants reported that the prince himself hadn't left the estate in days. On the fifth night, Kyra found she was looking forward to coming here and talking with Nicholas. It was nice to have someone to talk to, where she didn't have to pretend to be human. He was teaching her how to play a human game called cards; she wasn't very good at it. She was also enjoying the kissing, far more than she'd enjoyed kissing Mer men.

"Never mind this," Nicholas said, casting his cards down onto the table. They were arranged across the glass surface like ladders. "Tell me more about the sea."

"More?" Kyra said, swishing the wine in her glass. She'd become accustomed to it – the red kind, specifically.

"You still haven't told me about your family."

She hesitated. "There's not much to tell."

"I'm curious about how it all works. Are your families like ours? Do you have two parents? How do you… you know, have children? Is it the same as humans, or do you lay eggs?"

Kyra burst out laughing and narrowly avoided spilling her red wine all over the pale-green fabric of the loveseat.

"What's so funny?" he said, but he was laughing, too. "Fish lay eggs!"

"We don't lay eggs!" she cried. "We have *parts* like you!"

"You do?" A wrinkle appeared between his eyebrows at that news. "With the tail… you can't possibly have a…"

"We do. Our parts are hidden." She drank more wine, and nearly choked as she was still laughing. "Do you want more specifics?"

He roared with laughter. "Little mermaid babies," he said, as a wistful look came over him. "I can't even imagine what they must be like."

"Little terrors," she clarified. "We don't grow our claws until a later age. The teeth are just as sharp at birth. It's a nightmare for the mothers."

He shook his head. "I can't even believe we're having this conversation. You must have seen so many wonders down there, in the sea. I'd love to see it."

"You can swim, can't you?"

“Yes. Swimming is one thing – what you’ve seen down there, in deeper waters? Completely different. I couldn’t hold my breath long enough. I’d be dead before I got to the most incredible parts.”

She thought of the whales roving through the sea, carrying the Sea Mother’s blessings in their songs. The dolphins bounding along, clicking and chittering. Clusters of bright and blazing coral, and shimmering fish weaving in and out. “There are some incredible things,” she agreed.

“There’s only so much we can do from up here, to help sea life,” he told her. “When we find an animal in need of help, we do what we can. Sometimes, they’re afraid and get away, and we can no longer do anything for them.”

“Well, I can assure you, Mer do help animals too. When we’re not eating fish,” she joked, and turned serious again. “We respect the sea and all its creatures.”

“I never could have imagined an entire other civilisation down there.”

He rose to his feet, wandering to the balcony doors and flinging them open. The salty tang in the air was unmistakeable. Kyra breathed in as a breeze fluttered into the room, and looked out at the darkened night. She couldn’t see the ocean right now, but she sensed it there, like a beating heart.

“Do you miss it?” Nicholas said.

“It’s home,” she said. “Of course I do.”

“I know why you love it. Being out there, sailing, the open water and the sea air – dolphins jumping at the front of a ship. The sea almost calls to you. There’s something about it. It’s always been special to me.”

“For me, it’s home. The Sea Mother’s embrace. Eternally present. And now I’m not part of it. Even if I return…” She gave a shuddering sigh. “I have a contract with the sea witch now. It won’t ever be the same. I… I made that contract to escape the sea. The deal was if I ever go back, I belong to her.” *And if I succeed in my task, you won’t remember me*, she thought.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. There was a long pause before he asked, “Why did you come here, Kyra? You never did tell me. It must be something important, for you to risk making a contract with the witch, like Rhydian did.”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“You’re a mermaid. Can you blame me?” His eyes sparkled.

The wall she'd been building around herself was crumbling, and yet she knew she couldn't tell him what her aim was here. She could give him *something* though, couldn't she? The truth was, she longed to talk about her sister with someone who wasn't her father, who didn't clam up every time she was mentioned.

"I'll tell you something if you agree, no more questions after," she said.

He held up a hand, palm out, then pressed it to his chest, his expression serious. "On my honour."

"Very well," she replied. "I came here because I lost someone and I… couldn't bear it. I wanted to get away from the pain." That was partly true. She'd always wanted to escape from it.

For a short while, he said nothing, a slight crease between his brow. "I can understand that," he said slowly. "I lost someone close to me, too."

"You did?"

"My brother." His voice was breathy, like a whisper of wind. "It's probably why my father and I don't get along… I think it drove a wedge between us. He was always more interested in the family business than me. But he was always so supportive of whatever I wanted to do. I used to take him out sailing with me. And you? Who did you lose? Sorry, you told me not to pry further. Forget I said anything."

"No, it's… it's okay." This wasn't what she'd expected. He shared her pain – he understood. He'd lost a sibling, too. "My sister."

He shook his head, sadness in his eyes. "I'm sorry you lost her."

"And I'm sorry about your brother. What happened to him?" she asked, her voice hoarse. She leaned closer, inching her hand along the loveseat between them.

"He fell ill," he said. "They could never figure out what it was – the physician thought it was an infection. He was always in pain, grew more and more tired, lost weight. We tried all kinds of medicinal herbs, remedies. Even spellwork – the good kind – when we thought he might have been cursed or hexed." He laughed dryly, throwing his head back as if the stars could explain why this had happened. "He wasn't hexed. We were fools, hoping we could save him or figure out what was wrong, but we couldn't." His voice cracked.

Kyra placed her hand on top of his knuckles.

His fingers shifted, enclosing hers. "Magic can't heal bodies," he said. "Isn't that frustrating? Dark magic – curses, hexes, malicious spells – can

cause harm and injury, make people suffer, even transform them into something they wouldn't want to be. We've yet to find a magic that can heal people of illness and injury. It's unfair."

"You did everything you could for him. It's obvious you both loved him very much."

"The sorceress we called on was the best in Lumen at performing legal spells. Removing curses. Offering blessings, granting wishes. She couldn't grant mine. Whatever ailment he had, it wasn't a magical one. It was something deeper, something broken in his body."

Kyra squeezed his hand. "It isn't fair," she agreed. She'd turned to dark magic to come here, to try to avenge her sister. Darkness could sink its claws into the furthest, tightest corners that light couldn't touch. She didn't know much about the magic of this world above the sea, but it seemed even here, dark magic was a source of pain.

"Magic can't do everything," said Nicholas quietly. "And the dark kind… it devastates." He gestured towards the balcony. "And it's what we're up against here."

"You don't have to do this. You don't have to help me. The sea witch is my problem."

"And Rhydian is mine," he said determinedly, turning back to her, his eyes steely. "Lumen is my home. He's the prince. And he's taking the souls of his people – people he should be looking after. It's his kingdom."

You should have been the prince instead, she thought. He had the heart for it, the compassion for people, where Rhydian did not.

"And what will you do, to stop him?" Kyra said. "When the time comes – if he won't see reason?" She was testing him. Rhydian wouldn't see reason. He had to die, for Pearl and for his crimes here. Did Nicholas realise that? It broke her heart that Nicholas would forget her if she succeeded.

"I'll do anything," he said, and gripped her hand tighter.

She was opening her mouth to reply when someone banged on the door. "Nicholas, sir!" called a high-pitched voice. "Rhydian is leaving!"

Chapter Twenty

Kyra and Nicholas flew to their feet and rushed to the door, where a mousy-haired male servant informed them that the prince had just descended the staircase, so if they left now, they'd be able to follow.

They hurried past the young man to the staircase. "Thanks!" Nicholas called to him, over his shoulder. "I'll make sure you get something in return for this!"

The pathway to the wellhouse would previously have been used by servants, according to Nicholas, but now humans had something called "plumbing", they didn't need the well to access water. It was perfect for whatever wicked secrets the prince was keeping.

They snaked their way down to the passage, careful not to move too quickly and alert attention.

"We can't let him see us," Nicholas hissed, as they slipped under the stone archway.

They stepped out into the overgrown tangle of bushes and brambles. Once, it might have been a courtyard like the one Kyra trained in with Nicholas. Even the paving slabs were cracked and green with age and mildew, weeds sprouting everywhere, the overgrown trees almost eclipsing the sky from view. The prince had already disappeared into the wellhouse.

"Wait," Nicholas said quietly. "Let him get ahead of us. We don't want him to see us tailing him."

Kyra nodded. They waited in the quiet, the only sound a creature hooting and rustling somewhere over their heads in the night.

After a few moments, giving Rhydian time to put enough distance between them, they followed, heading into the archway. It was empty inside, save for a giant stone well sitting in the centre, shrouded in darkness

and dappled with moss. Something sharp poked up from the circular outline. Kyra leaned closer for a better look.

“Is that a ladder?” whispered Nicholas. He moved closer and ran his fingers over the jutting shapes. “It is!”

Kyra peered further over the edge. He was right. A ladder reached down into the blackness. The prince’s glowing lantern was gone, as if swallowed by the void.

“Is there a passage down there?” she wondered, keeping her voice low to avoid any echoing. “I can’t see Rhydian.”

“Could be. Shall we find out?”

“What if he sees us?”

He shrugged. “We’ll have an excuse ready. We were out for an evening walk and saw him come this way. Or Catarina sent you to find him. It doesn’t matter – he doesn’t know we suspect him.”

“For now,” Kyra pointed out. “We have to be careful.”

“We will.”

Kyra’s mind churned. If Nicholas wasn’t here, this would have been the perfect opportunity to kill Rhydian. At the same time, if she killed him now, they’d never know exactly what he was up to with the sea witch. That knowledge had to come first.

“I’ll go first,” Nicholas offered. He tested the top of the ladder to make sure it was secure, then clambered over the top of the well and lowered himself onto the foot-holds.

“Nicholas… be careful,” said Kyra. They had no idea how deep it was – or what lay at the bottom.

He gave her a reassuring smile, half of his face in darkness, and nodded. “You too.” He descended, his head disappearing.

Kyra followed. She moved slowly, the manoeuvre tricky – she was used to walking and running now, and climbing stairs, even fighting. But climbing carefully over an edge and navigating a ladder were not things that came naturally.

She gripped the ladder hard as she carefully descended. It smelt of damp, and a *drip, drip* filled the silence.

As she placed her foot on the next rung, it slid. She cried out as she nearly slipped, grasping the ladder tightly and flinging her foot more tightly into the hold.

“Careful!” Nicholas cried from below. “Are you alright?”

She didn’t dare look down. Her voice came out choked when she answered, “Yes. I’m fine.”

“Take it nice and slow.”

It pained her to do that, since the prince could be getting away from them, but she slowed her pace. When she reached the bottom and her shoes hit stone, she let out a sigh of relief.

Nicholas touched her arm. “Alright?” he said quietly.

“I’m fine. Let’s hurry after him.”

“I never expected this…” Nicholas murmured as they pressed on. The well led off down another long passageway, where the stone brickwork made way for craggy walls covered in moss. “Most wells are… contained, circular, at the bottom,” he explained – for her benefit, which she was grateful for. “No large passages like this. Where does this go?”

“I don’t know,” she said, keeping her voice low.

There was only one path to follow, which was fortunate, as they were soon walking in complete darkness, feeling their way onwards and trying not to bump into one another. More than once, she was caught out by rocks jutting and snaking out of the increasingly haphazard walls. The back of her neck crawled as they weaved an invisible path; the passage reminded her of Levina’s cave. Something was shushing, whispering – the sea?

As they continued, raised voices echoed towards them, bouncing off the walls, and Kyra saw light ahead. Nicholas grabbed Kyra’s arm and motioned her into the shadows, where several jagged rocks jutted out, forming an alcove they could conceal themselves inside. Nicholas crouched down, and she squatted beside him, peering through a small gap in the crags.

Kyra could just about make out the prince, his back to them. Behind him, the tunnel opened out into a huge cave mouth, where the sea was a churning black mass of activity. Perched on a rock was Levina, her dark tail curled beneath her, hair and tendrils on her head streaming in the breeze. Levina clutched her calcite staff. The huge white gemstone held in the claw-like top glowed so brightly it was like a second moon.

Sucking in a breath, Kyra listened.

“I told you, I don’t know where Narissa went,” Rhydian was saying. “I assumed she’d gone back to you. Catarina is in pieces, thinking she’s dead. Narissa was so good at pretending, Cat thinks they were friends.”

“If the girl has been disloyal and tried to leave me, she’ll feel my wrath,” said Levina. Her face was in shadow; her tone was clipped.

“Relax. We don’t need her. No one suspects me, and no one has seen me getting rid of any of the bodies. Do you have enough souls for the ritual yet?”

“Oh yes. More power isn’t something to be scoffed at. I want as many as possible. Keep collecting until the night of the blood moon. The more I have, the better. I’ll be able to draw on even more power, make the tidal wave as large as possible.”

Kyra stiffened. *Blood moon? Tidal wave?* Her mind reeled with confusion. Why was Levina working with Rhydian, the same prince she’d agreed to let Kyra kill as part of their contract? It didn’t make any sense. It sounded like she needed him to enact her plan, so why risk Kyra killing him? Or had she thought – like her girls – that Kyra wasn’t up to the task and would never do it?

“And this tidal wave,” said Rhydian, crossing his arms. His voice quavered, and he quickly corrected it. “You give me your word it will leave my kingdom – my family – unharmed in this. Including Catarina. That was what we agreed, when I overheard you talking with those other…” He hesitated. “… girls. It’s the whole reason I signed the contract with you to let you into the estate.”

Levina waved a lazy hand, glimmering with rings. “Yes, yes. I remember. I’ll make sure it avoids Lumen. The rest of the world will sink.” She laughed. “Don’t worry, you’ll keep your little kingdom to rule over.”

“We need to make sure we can survive as a single kingdom after this. That we have enough resources and—”

“And you will,” she hissed. “Don’t push me, Rhydian. I’m giving you more than enough.”

“You better keep your word.”

Levina’s tone became ice-cold. “Darling, I don’t need you anymore, so don’t test me. My girls were able to enter your estate as soon as you removed that nasty spell, and we’ve placed enough enchantments of our own that there’s nothing you can do to stop us going inside now, even if you wanted to. Imagine what the kingdom would do if they discovered the prince, the future king, was involved in dark magic! First to protect his estate from thieves, then to hurt his staff! You wouldn’t want them to find out about any of that, would you?”

Rhydian spluttered something incoherent – Kyra imagined he might have been dreaming up an argument, such as throwing her girls out, but he seemed to think better of it.

“I’m not one of your servants,” Levina added. “If you push me, I’ll kill you.”

Beside Kyra, Nicholas was breathing hard, his eyes wide. Kyra couldn’t believe what she was hearing. It went some ways to explaining things: Levina didn’t care if Kyra killed the prince because she’d already got what she needed from him. Her girls, inside the estate. And now she was hearing all this, it all made sense. The girls were probably involved in the killings alongside Rhydian. If Rhydian died, it didn’t matter; the girls were inside, and could come and go as they pleased without needing him.

“I have this.” Rhydian spoke slowly, and tapped the base of his throat, where the seaglass necklace shone. “Remember that.”

Levina cackled, pressing a hand to her chest. The sound echoed around the space, loud and wailing. Kyra could see why people thought there was a ghost in the wellhouse. Soon her laughter faded, and her words were laced with darkness. “You have a backbone. I can appreciate that. You don’t think I’d let you wear that necklace without enchanting it in some way, do you? If you destroy it, any souls inside will automatically be transferred to my staff. If you hide it, I’ll know exactly where it is. I’ve been watching you carefully, Rhydian – every move you make. You think I’m not tracking your every movement? Put one of those human feet wrong, and I’ll either kill you or curse you. Which would you prefer? Being turned into an eel? Or death?”

Rhydian was silent. Kyra couldn’t see his face; she could imagine his expression: pursed lips, pale. Her mind was churning. She couldn’t believe she’d been so stupid. He hadn’t been switching out the pendants on his necklace at all. It had glowed white whenever it had a soul inside. It happened after Ruth died. And when the servant died, and she caught him talking to Adelia at the top of the stairs, the necklace had been glowing white. He must have bumped into his sister after taking the servant’s soul.

Kyra clenched her teeth. She’d been a fool. It had been right there, all along.

“We don’t have much time until the blood moon now,” said Levina. “A week. You will work to collect a few more souls in case I need them – and if you fail to do so, my girls will do it. For now…” She waved her staff,

shifting it towards him. A flood of milk-white vapour poured from Rhydian's necklace, into her staff, with a faint humming sound. "I'll take those."

There must have been more deaths at the estate, ones they hadn't heard about yet – or that he'd covered up well enough for no one to find out.

Levina shifted, the tip of her staff glowing in the darkness like a star. Kyra sucked in a breath.

"We need to go," Nicholas whispered. "Quickly, before they're done."

Kyra nodded. She followed him back down the weaving passage until the voices grew faint, her heartbeat pounding a steady rhythm in her ears.

Chapter Twenty-One

They went back to Nicholas's room. Kyra couldn't contemplate sleeping yet, even though her body felt as though it were weighted down by rocks. She couldn't stop hearing the conversation between Rhydian and Levina down in the cave, her mind echoing it back to her. Now she knew the details of what the prince had been up to, gathering souls for Levina, she couldn't help but wonder: had her sister really been turned to sea foam? Or had she been part of Levina and the prince's schemes? Did Rhydian do it – collect Pearl's soul, as if it meant nothing more to him than a pile of dust? It was like a blow to her chest, like everything she'd believed had been tilted and shaken.

Nicholas went straight to the bottles of alcohol and grabbed two glasses. "We can't let her get away with this – no, both of them!" he said, pouring out the wine. His hands were shaking so badly he sloshed some of the liquid over the sides and cursed. "We have to do something! The whole world is at stake here – entire countries. Not Lumen, but Orinthia, Elrune, the Amber Isles, Calavaria, and I have friends in the—"

"Nicholas," she cut in, her tiredness making her voice heavy. He continued to list the names of places she hadn't heard of.

"—and we need resources," he went on. "Ships, men, weapons; I have sailor friends who would help me if they can—"

"Nicholas." Kyra crossed the room and took his hands in hers. The red wine he'd spilled was dripping onto the marble floor like droplets of blood, reminding her of Narissa. She heaved a sigh. "Take a breath. Let me fetch something to clean that up."

She went to the bathroom to fetch a damp washcloth, and cleaned the spillage. When she was done, she accepted a glass of wine from him and joined him on the loveseat.

“We do need a plan,” he said.

“I know.” She took a deep breath, trying to stop ruminating. She didn’t know what had happened to Pearl – whether she’d turned into foam or died so her soul could be taken – and agonising over it wasn’t going to help. She *would* find out. “Let’s go over it logically. You said your sailor friends would help. Is that true? Even if they don’t know what they’re fighting against?”

“They don’t have to know fully, if you don’t want me to mention Mer,” he said. “Many of them have encountered dark magic on their travels, sorcerers and sorceresses who would do evil. I can tell them Levina is a sorceress and that’s all they need to know.”

“And how soon can you have them here?” Kyra asked.

“Some of them came for the wedding and are still in Lumen. I can contact others by bluebird messenger, ask them to come as a matter of urgency. If they’re in Lumen, they can be here in days.”

“Good. Let’s do that.”

“They’ll bring weapons – plenty of them. Armed ships.”

“It’ll take more than a few ships and men to take down Levina – she has a sea serpent at her command, too,” Kyra said, gnawing at her bottom lip, a habit she seemed to have picked up here in the estate. “You can’t fight magic with might.”

“Do you have any other ideas?”

She nodded. “I don’t know if it’ll work. I’m going to try calling on my father and his men. Some of them have powers of air and sea – enough to go up against her.” Maybe if she told them what she suspected about Pearl, they’d be more inclined to help.

“Your father?” said Nicholas, lifting a brow. “You’ve never talked about your family.”

“Yes,” she said. “My father, Einar. He’s a warden – a guard for Mer royalty, similar to the Royal Guard you have here. If there’s a threat to the king, the wardens will come and fight it. I expect Levina won’t be done when she’s swallowed the land – it sounded like she wanted to take the sea, too. Maybe she plans on turning over the Mer to Rhydian? I’ll send a message to my father later, ask him to join us in the fight.”

“Mer have a way to send messages?” he asked.

“Yes.” She smiled, sipping at the tangy wine. “Similar to your bluebirds, actually. Ours are schools of fish.”

“Wow.” He grinned, the mask of worry slipping. “I’d like to see that someday.”

They fell silent, drinking. Outside, fat rain droplets began to pound on the window panes.

“At least we have some time to prepare, before…” Nicholas trailed off. “The blood moon is a week away. Who will he take, during that time? More staff members? Someone I’m friends with?” His hand tightened on his wine glass.

“Careful,” she advised. “You don’t want to do what I did, and smash it everywhere.”

He barked out a laugh. “It was quite entertaining, in hindsight.”

“Oh? I can assure you, I’m far more fun than that when I’m in the mood.” She was trying to lighten him up, but as soon as she spoke, she realised the words sounded flirty.

Nicholas stood up and moved closer to her, with slow steps.

“Maybe you can show me how much fun you can be,” he said. He reached up, his fingertips skimming her cheekbones – she imagined what it would feel like if her scales were there, his hands skirting the ridges, and she shivered.

“Is that fear talking?” she asked huskily.

He shook his head. His brown eyes were warm, molten. She glanced down. Even in her Mer form, he’d looked at her like she was something special, a jewel plucked from a treasure box.

“What’s wrong?” he said, and his hand fluttered to her neck, cupping the back of it, brushing her hair away. “You don’t want this? We can take it slow, if you want.”

A throaty laugh escaped her. She could lose him when they took on Levina. And if she killed Rhydian, Levina’s terms meant Nicholas would forget her. She didn’t want that; she wanted him to remain in her life. But if he didn’t…

“I thought I made it clear how I feel. I do want this. I want you,” she said.

He was so close she could feel his breath in her hair. “I don’t want to have any regrets. I want you, too.”

“I’m not like you, though, you do know that. I’m Mer. Are you sure it’ll work out between us? Something could happen—”

“You don’t have to think so far ahead,” he said quietly. “Don’t overthink it, Kyra. Even if it’s fleeting, even if something happens to us when we confront Levina, can’t fleeting things be beautiful too? Like you, in your Mer form. You were mesmerising.”

Her mind was humming, lingering on that word. *Mesmerising.* This form she was becoming accustomed to – this human body – she was wondering what it would be like to fully experience it with him. His lips on hers, on the places she’d never explored, what it would feel like.

“You’re right,” she said, and she leaned over. “We don’t have to think about the future right now.”

It didn’t matter. If something happened and she didn’t act, be with him, she’d regret it forever.

Their lips met and he tasted of fruity wine and sea salt. His arms encased her and she sank into the embrace, pulling him closer. Her hands found his hair, weaving through the soft strands.

Nicholas pulled her backwards, and they were tumbling onto the loveseat and she was in his lap, her human body fizzing like a roiling pool of hot water.

“Let’s forget everything else for a while,” she said against his mouth, and he smiled as her fingers found his collarbone.

“Have you done this before?” he asked her.

She burst out laughing. “With a tail, yes. Not with a human.”

“Do you know how—”

“Mer still have parts, Nicholas,” she said quietly, smirking and trailing her fingers down his neck. “I told you before! They’re a bit more… hidden than yours. Don’t worry. I know exactly what to do.”

He grinned and pulled her down, pressing his lips against hers.

Kyra woke cocooned in Nicholas’s bed the following morning, the soft silk sheets like water against her human skin. She was floaty, *happy*, despite everything. She’d been with Mer folk back home; this was different. Nicholas had been gentle where most Mer were rough – he’d looked into her eyes as if she were the most beautiful thing he’d seen, brushed her hair back softly, whispered in her ear. She giggled when she thought about her newfound appreciation for human hands; his had been soft and velvety.

Nicholas was hurrying around the room, dressing. She needed to move, too, but instead she appreciated him from afar. He still had his shirt off, and

she admired the muscles on his back.

“What time is it?” she said, yawning. She was becoming more human by the day in this place.

“Seven,” he answered, pulling his arms through a white shirt.

“I need to go. Catarina will be awake in about an hour.” She forced herself from the warm bed, collecting yesterday’s clothes and shoving them on.

“I’ll write to my men today,” Nicholas said.

“And I’ll call on my father and the wardens.” She’d meant to do it last night, but they’d ended up… distracted.

Nicholas rushed to her side and pressed a kiss to her mouth. She smiled. “See you later,” he said.

When she was fully dressed, with her bag hanging at her hip, she hurried down the staircase and exited the estate through a side door. The sun was shining, birds singing in a musical chorus, and wispy clouds were streaked across the blue sky. Kyra followed a dirt track down to the beach she’d first arrived on, picking her way through the trees until she got to the sand. The shore was empty, save for streaks of seaweed and some lone white birds pecking about the sand.

Kyra stood near the water – far enough away that it didn’t touch her. She wouldn’t need to transform for this. Cupping her thumb and forefinger together, she placed them into her mouth and blew. A shrill whistle echoed out over the sea, and it vibrated through her bones. The sound seemed to repeat as it scudded over the ocean.

She waited.

A series of heavy ripples pushed their way across the surface, growing faster and deeper, sending lines of foam into the air. Sparkling silver fish leapt in zig-zags, up and down, as if waving at her.

Kyra laughed, throwing her arms up and waving back. She’d never been so glad to see a school of messengers.

The fish bore down on her, gathering in the shallow waters, their angular silver faces sticking up. Dozens of beady black eyes studied her. The only thing that marked these messenger fish as special was a soft blue aura that seemed to surround them – some said it was the blessing of the Sea Mother, who wanted her sons and daughters to be able to communicate when they were far apart, and had bestowed the task upon these creatures.

“I have a message for you,” Kyra said, crouching down in the sand. The fish blinked up at her, buffeted by the waves. “Take this message to my father, Einar…”

The week in the lead-up to the blood moon was excruciating. Nicholas had written to many of his sailor friends to ask for their help, and some had responded favourably, promising ships and men and weaponry to try to bring down the sorceress. Kyra had no choice but to continue to attend to Catarina, keeping a close eye on Rhydian and tailing him when she could in case he killed more people. She wasn’t the only one, though. Catarina barely left his side, and Kyra overheard her telling him he wasn’t spending enough time with her, considering she was his wife now.

“I know, and I’m sorry, darling,” he’d drawl, planting a kiss on her blushed cheek. “More opportunities came out of our wedding than we’d hoped. You were so beautiful, people are falling at our feet to organise events where we’re *both* present, and I want to make sure my stunning wife has all the opportunities in the world. I want to show you off. Your Aunt Ruth’s funeral should be properly arranged soon – I know you’re anxious about the delays to that – and once we’ve attended, we can go on our honeymoon and not be disturbed.”

That would placate her for a short while, and the next day the cycle would begin again.

When the evening of the blood moon arrived, Kyra made her way to Nicholas’s room, slipping away when Meredith had gone to the postal room to write to her family. Nicholas was nursing a glass of water, tapping his fingernails on the side of the glass. The balcony doors were thrown open, a cool breeze blowing in, ruffling the curtains and teasing his hair. The navy sky was filled with thick clouds, concealing the stars, the moon full and peeking through a gap – but not yet red. Nicholas’s sword was propped against the loveseat, glinting in the overhead light, and a bundle of rope and strange, long sticks were gathered on the plush seat.

“Rope?” she said, with a raised brow, as she closed the door behind her.

“You never know when you’ll need to secure or tow something, when you’re dealing with the sea,” he replied. “Best to be prepared.”

“Trying to keep a clear head?” Kyra asked him, gesturing at the water. Nicholas was wearing a dark velvet jacket, the white shirt underneath unbuttoned at the collar. His hair was mussed, and there were dark rings

under his eyes, as though he'd slept little the previous night. He looked vulnerable, fragile.

"I thought it was wise," he answered.

"You're probably right. How many of your sailor friends came, in the end?" she asked. He'd been absent for most of the day checking on them; they'd docked in a cove to the east of the estate, out of sight of the royals.

"Enough." Nicholas checked his pocket watch from the inside of his breast pocket. "As soon as the shadow covers the moon and it starts to turn red, they know to move."

"Levina will probably call the serpent, to protect her during the ritual," Kyra said. "And no doubt her girls will be there. Maybe the sailors arriving will spook them – Mer don't like to be seen, if they can help it."

"My sailor friends are prepared. They've been in plenty of sea battles. What about your father?"

"I don't know." She sighed, twisting her glass in her hand. "I sent the message – whether they come… We'll see."

Kyra moved towards the window. Droplets of rain were appearing on the panes either side of the balcony doors. A rumble of thunder groaned in the night – a storm was brewing.

She clenched her teeth. "This will only make her stronger," she ground out. "Levina already had powers of air and sea by birth. It's where her skills lie. She'll be able to draw on the storm to fight back."

It was just their luck that a storm had chosen to arrive today, when it had been sunny and warm for weeks. All the humidity building up had come to a head tonight. And Kyra had no powers of her own to fight back. She'd never felt so weak.

Nicholas set his glass down and stood leaning against the dresser, his arms loosely crossed, and his human body looked so weak, so breakable. The worry she felt for him seared across her chest. If something happened to him…

The words she wanted to express got stuck in her throat. "Nicholas," she said. "I…"

He glanced up. "Are you having second thoughts – doubts about the plan?"

"No," she said. "It's just… When I came here, I didn't expect to like anybody quite so much," she said.

"Is that so?" he said. He straightened up, looking amused.

“I didn’t know much about humans, except what I was taught.”

“Taught? You learn about us?”

“Yes. For our safety, mainly – supposedly, we were also one and the same species, at one time, and could shift between the two forms. Some Mer ventured onto land and never returned, and we became… separate.”

Nicholas laughed. “Do you believe that?”

“It’s a possibility. I’m here in this form, aren’t I? Perhaps Levina’s spell… awakened something old inside of me.”

Nicholas looked towards the window, out into the rumbling darkness, where the storm was building. “Imagine,” he breathed. “It must be incredible down there, in the water. I’d like to see it.”

“Perhaps I’ll show you one day, if we can get you a tail,” she joked.

He turned back to her, grinning. When he checked his pocket watch, his expression became serious again. “We should be going soon. It’s nearly time. I need to take the flares down to the cliffs, so the ships know where to come in.” He motioned at the items gathered on the loveseat – the rope and the strange sticks.

“Flares?”

“Lights. To guide them this way in the darkness.” Nicholas picked up his sword, slotting it into the sheath at his hip.

“Be careful,” she urged him, and pulled him in for a kiss, lingering on his mouth, on the scent of him. “I’ll meet you at the coast.”

“You’re not coming now?” he asked, touching her shoulder.

“I have something to take care of first. I won’t be long. Can I take some writing materials?”

“Okay.” He pressed a kiss to her mouth again, and she grabbed what she needed from the dresser and dashed from the room, feeling breathless.

Catarina had mentioned that Rhydian was in his room, and had asked for privacy. He’d used the excuse of honeymoon planning, telling his fiancée he wanted to leaf through books and come up with the perfect destination as a surprise. She hadn’t seemed happy about it.

In the hallway leading to Rhydian’s room, Kyra paused, leaning against the flat top of a decorative pillar, and trying to inject authority into her words as she wrote:

Rhydian,

Come down to the coast early – as soon as you can. There are some things we need to do before the ritual can begin. Hurry now.

Levina

She re-read it three times to be sure the tone was correct, then slipped it into the envelope she'd brought, and scribbled his name on the front.

There was a guard on Rhydian's door, as she'd expected, his plated metal armour polished to a shine – she could see her reflection in the parts that weren't covered by yellow fabric and a blazing sun. A sword hung at his hip, but his arms were crossed loosely, and he looked as though he were struggling not to fall asleep. He stood to attention when he noticed her.

"I have a message for Prince Harcourt," she said.

"He's not to be disturbed," said the guard.

"It's from Catarina – I'm her handmaiden. And I have no intention of disturbing Rhy— the prince, and having his grumpiness directed at me." She tried for a smile, but anger sliced through her at the thought that he might have taken her sister's soul, and it wavered. "I can slip it under the door?" she suggested.

The guard smiled faintly back and motioned to the crack beneath the door. "Very well."

Crouching down, she slipped the paper in the gap and thanked him.

"You may want to knock so he's aware of the note," Kyra advised. "I wouldn't want Catarina to come down here and get angry with you."

The guard's face paled. She left before he could say anything else.

Kyra entered one of the staff passageways – where a few girls were carrying empty trays, plates and cups to the kitchens to be washed – and exited the manor through a side door, looping her way onto the dirt track where she'd first met Nicholas. She left the estate by the locked gate.

The moon was full and ghostly overhead, wind whipping through the trees. The rain was picking up even more now, soaking into her hair and her skin, the scent of rainwater mingling with the woodsy smell of the trees and the saltwater tang.

When she reached the cove, the moon was showing the first signs of shadow. The blood moon was close. The trees blustered behind her and she kept to the darkness, peering out across the horizon, squinting. Nicholas

was up there somewhere on the clifftops. There was a sharp blaze of red – his flare? The ships would be sailing this way soon.

She glanced up – the moon was still white. She squinted across to the sea.

Dark shapes rose up from the water, into the shallows, ear-fins sharp and glinting in the light of the moon. Levina's girls.

In the middle of them all – like a queen – was Levina, draped in scraps of seaweed and wearing a tiara made of pale coral and shining pearls. The pearls made Kyra's insides hurt as they caught the moonlight.

Levina held her staff tightly, the orb at the top shining, radiating white light.

Forcing herself to look away, Kyra cast her attention to the clifftops, hoping Levina would be too distracted by her goal to notice Nicholas's flare burning.

"Join hands, girls! We must meditate and centre ourselves before we begin," Levina ordered, raising her arms to the moon, eyes closed. The rain was lashing down, forming a hazy sheet between Kyra and the gathered Mer.

Levina's girls formed a circle around her in the shallows, their torsos exposed, the fins across their breasts shiny and blue-green under the stars. Each girl was adorned with a criss-crossing coral crown, and wore matching smiles, their eyes closed as they were bathed in moonlight.

Fool girls! You have no idea what you're doing! Kyra thought, grinding her teeth.

The Mer girls laced their claws together, tipping their heads back so shafts of moonlight struck their scales.

"Soon it will be time! Be calm and clear-headed. Remember what I taught you, and wait for my word," Levina ordered. "Let the moon wash over you!"

They still had their eyes closed. Kyra turned, hastily picking her way through the bracken. She might have time to kill the prince before it all began.

Chapter Twenty-Two

When Kyra climbed closer to the dirt track, Rhydian was picking his way down the bracken a short distance away. He hadn't seen her. Reaching to her waist, she grabbed the sword Nicholas had given her, fingers firm on the hilt. For once, she was thankful for her lack of claws – they would get in her way, make her clumsy. She was better off without them.

Sword in hand, she hurtled towards him, the anger burning a track in her throat – but he heard her coming.

His head whipped round. Her blade gleamed. Rhydian flung his hand up, aiming for her wrist, to stop her – but she hadn't trained for nothing. She spun away from his grasp on the balls of her feet.

The rain had made the grit beneath them slippery, filled with puddles and wet leaves that had been pulled from the trees, and she slipped. Rhydian seized his chance and charged at her, grabbing her arms, wrestling her back.

"Let go of me!" she shouted, keeping a tight hold of her sword.

"Drop the sword!" Rhydian roared back. "What are you doing—"

He gave an *oof* noise as she tried to shove against him, cursing her human body. If she had her tail she could bash him in the side, knock him senseless. His fingers were like a vice around her skinny wrists. She pushed again – he resisted. And then they were both tumbling.

She landed on her side, hard, the force knocking the wind out of her and making her gasp. The sword flew out of her grasp.

Rhydian was on her in an instant – he pinned her arms down, and she scrabbled with her useless fingernails, kicking out with her legs, flailing like a fish caught on a hook.

“Stop *wriggling*!” he yelled. He risked letting go of one of her arms, reaching for her sword—

Kyra took the chance as his weight on her lessened and heaved him sideways, pushing him off. He cried out, splashing into a puddle that muddied his neck, the sword just out of reach. Scrambling to her feet, Kyra snatched up the weapon, about to turn, to plunge it into his chest.

Before she could twist around, she was hitting the ground again, teeth slamming together – he had hold of her ankle. His hands clawed up her leg.

“Let go!” she screamed, kicking out, clipping him in the face with her shoe, but he held on.

Suddenly her leg was free. Twisting, her heart stampeding, she saw Nicholas, yanking Rhydian off her by the back of his jacket. There was rope strung about his waist along with his sword. She froze.

“Rhydian, stop!” Nicholas was shouting. His clothes were drenched, his hair sticking to the sides of his face. “What are you doing?! Let her go!”

“She attacked *me*! She—” The rest of the prince’s sentence was cut off by a clap of lightning and a roar of thunder filling the sky. In the harsh light, Nicholas’s face was pale with shock, his eyes wide. He turned to Kyra, questioning, and she could imagine what the prince had said. *She tried to kill me.*

“She can’t be allowed to get away with it, it’s treason!” Rhydian shouted, and he spun, his face contorted and wrinkled with rage.

Before Kyra could lift her sword, Rhydian had pounced, fingers on her throat, squeezing. Blinded by another flare of lightning, Kyra choked. Stars erupted in her vision. Her hands were weak and she dropped the sword.

No. No! She had to get free. She had to kill him, for what he’d done to Pearl!

Nicholas loomed over Rhydian’s shoulder, a shadow in the storm-light, and he grabbed Rhydian, slamming a punch into the side of his ear.

Rhydian staggered, freeing Kyra, who sucked in a ragged mouthful of air and rain. Grabbing at her sword, she wheeled round – Rhydian was grappling with Nicholas, pinning him to the ground, his fist colliding with Nicholas’s nose.

Kyra pressed the blade to Rhydian’s throat. “Get off him,” she snarled, blood pounding in her ears.

Lip curling, Rhydian raised his hands and rose to his feet, leaving Nicholas on the ground. Kyra followed, her sword pressed to his throat. She

drew a pinprick of blood, and the prince gasped. She should draw this out. Make him suffer as much as Pearl had. What had he done to her? How had she felt, at the end? She imagined her sister's face, once happy and smiling, twisted and warped like Aunt Ruth and the servants at the estate. How betrayed she must have felt in her last moments: realising the man she loved was not only breaking her heart but intending to kill her and take her soul.

"Kyra," Nicholas warned. "You don't have to do this." He was speaking softly, as if she were a wild animal.

"I do!" she cried. Emotion rose in her like a wave, choking her – this was her chance, he couldn't stop her.

"What's going on?" another voice shouted.

Kyra kept her hands gripped on her sword, glancing to the side. Catarina was standing on the dirt track, staring down into the bracken where they were gathered. She wore a thick green cloak, the hood pulled up to protect her from the rain. Her blonde hair stuck out at the edges, damp and frizzed. For once, she didn't seem to care she was dishevelled or wet – or that she was out in the storm without any of the Royal Guard. What was she doing here? It didn't matter; Kyra's haze of anger eclipsed the concern. She could stay here and watch him die.

"Catarina!" Rhydian shouted. "She's committing treason, you have to __"

"Shut up! This is for my sister!" Kyra screamed. She wanted to throw hurtful words at Rhydian before she killed him, to remind him of Pearl and what he'd done. Maybe it was better if Catarina heard this – if she found out what a wicked person he truly was. "You cast Pearl aside for Catarina and broke her heart. Because of you, Pearl is *dead*."

"Kyra, please," Nicholas said. Kyra wasn't listening.

Rhydian's eyes widened. His hands were still in the air, palms forwards, and he took a step back. "Catarina," he began. "Don't listen to her. Pearl isn't dead—"

"She is, because of you! And now you're working with the sea witch! So, what happened exactly, Rhydian? Why don't you tell your wife? Did Pearl turn into sea foam when you chose Catarina over her?"

"W-What?" Rhydian spluttered. "Sea foam? And why would I have killed Pearl, I loved her! B-But that was in the past!" he added hastily, holding his hands towards Catarina. "I love *you*, Cat, I swear!"

“Pearl was a mermaid!” Kyra shrieked. “All she wanted was to marry *you*, so she made a deal with Levina to come here! And you ruined everything. Now she’s dead. So, did Pearl die because of the deal she made? Or did you kill her and take her soul, like you did with the others at the estate? Tell me, Rhydian! No more lies!”

Catarina took a few steps down into the muddy shrubs, a scowl creasing her face. “The others at the estate…? What does she mean?”

“W-What?” Rhydian spluttered. Lightning lit the prince’s horrified face as it blazed over the sky. “No… I would have known about Pearl… Levina would have told me! Pearl *left*. I told her I didn’t want to marry her and she left… went home… She can’t be dead!” His mouth was curling in a different way now – as if he were fighting back tears.

“Don’t pretend you have any emotion left for her,” Kyra spat. “You took her soul, didn’t you? Like you did the rest. The servants. Ruth.”

“No! I—”

“Rhydian,” said Catarina. Her voice was cutting, like the sharp edge of a blade. “Is this true? Were you involved in what happened at the estate?”

“I…” Rhydian’s eyes were frantic, bulging. He looked from Kyra to his wife, his hands shaking as he held them in the air. He seemed to realise he’d been caught out, that he couldn’t lie and cheat his way out of this one. “I can’t tell you. I can’t!”

“Why not?” Catarina snapped.

“Because he has a contract with the sea witch!” Kyra cried. “If he tells you any of the details – if he breaks his contract – he’ll be turned into a fish! Isn’t that right?”

The guilt was written all over Rhydian’s face. He might not have been able to confirm or deny anything, but his face was as plain as day. The fact that he wasn’t speaking was more than enough.

“You *are* involved,” Catarina said slowly. “It’s like last time, when you hired the sorceress to put an enchantment on the estate!”

“I told you why I did it!” Rhydian said. “We had some thieves break in and steal things. Mother was upset, thinking I let it happen because I wasn’t paying attention, so I asked a sorceress for an enchantment that would turn anyone with the intent to steal into dust. I wanted Mother to trust me, to take me seriously as future king—”

“You could have done that without dark magic!” Catarina shouted. “I kept the secret for you, all this time. You promised never to go near dark

magic again. It sounds like you have, regardless of your promise! I told you how dangerous it could be!"

"He had someone remove the spell on the estate," Kyra said. "So the sea witch's girls could access it and start killing people, and steal their souls."

Rhydian opened his mouth to defend himself and snapped it shut again.

"My aunt," Catarina said, her voice trembling. She took a step away from them. "You knew all along. You tried to deceive me, make me think I was mad. I knew it. You were acting so strangely. I thought you were involved, and I didn't want to believe it—"

"So now you see him for what he truly is," Kyra ground out. "He's played you for a fool. He deserves to die." She pushed the blade closer to the prince's pale skin; more blood seeped from the tiny cut she'd made.

"Kyra," Nicholas interrupted. "Stop this. Your sister wouldn't want this for you. You have to stop this."

"Don't tell me what she'd want! She isn't here – because of him!" Tears were streaming down Kyra's face along with the lashing rain. When had that happened? Her throat burned from shouting, but it felt good.

"If what you say is true," said Nicholas slowly, "your sister loved him. Do you think she'd thank you, for harming him? Do you think she'd be proud if you became a killer? I don't. I think she'd want you to find your own happiness. To be better than him."

A memory flooded Kyra. Her sister embracing her, her words cheeky: *You really should be more trusting. Humans aren't all bad.* And another memory, after the prince had broken her heart. *I want him to be happy, and if that isn't with me, so be it.* She was a better person than Kyra would ever be.

The prince's expression looked crushed. Catarina was standing with her hands clasped to the neckline of her cloak, her cheeks appearing hollowed out in the moonlight.

"Pearl said she went home," the prince said weakly. "I never meant for her to die."

"You didn't know she was dead," Kyra said.

"N-No…" He trailed off. "She left. She went home to her family…"

"You've trusted Levina this whole time, gone along with her schemes, but she hasn't been truthful with you about anything! Pearl was a mermaid."

Rhydian was shaking his head frantically. “You’re lying…” His voice lacked conviction.

“Levina gave me a potion so I could come to land, like she did for Pearl!” Kyra said, her voice rising. “I came here to kill you. I thought you deserved it, because you got my sister killed. In the end, only one person is responsible for this pain, and that person is Levina. The person you trusted. She manipulated you.”

Rhydian’s face crumpled; it almost softened. Tears shimmered in his eyes. Kyra’s hand was trembling on the grip of her sword.

A soft hand on her wrist made her jump. It was Catarina. “Kyra,” she said gently, and her voice was so broken, it pulled Kyra out of the haze she was caught in. “I know how you feel. He may as well have killed my aunt himself, and he’s caused a lot of pain. This isn’t right. Enough lives have been taken.”

All this time, Kyra had been training to protect the prince in the courtyard, with Nicholas. When she’d had a goal to join the wardens, to defend Mer royalty, like her father did, all she’d wanted was to protect others. She suddenly felt like she’d betrayed herself. Nicholas was watching her. Catarina’s hand was ice-cold on her wrist. There was warmth in her eyes, despite her brokenness.

“You suspected him?” Kyra croaked. “All along?”

“I didn’t know for sure,” Catarina said quietly, barely audible over the rushing rain. “It was odd, that he was often close by when it happened… And he kept disappearing. People tried to convince me he was smoking again. I’m not stupid. He never smelt of cigarettes. I… I saw him go to the wellhouse. Nobody ever goes there. I didn’t understand why. Not until now.”

Kyra jerked a nod.

“We don’t have time for this,” Nicholas cut in. “Kyra, the sea witch’s ritual.” The moon overhead was pink, and darkening.

With a sigh, Kyra lowered her sword, making the prince gasp. “I won’t kill you,” Kyra said softly. “He can’t be allowed to go free, though. He’s working with the sea witch – he could turn on us at any moment. The sea witch has bigger plans,” Kyra added, for Catarina’s benefit. “We have to stop her tonight.”

“I won’t turn on you!” Rhydian blurted. “I can help, I—”

“Let me deal with him,” said Catarina. “I’ll take him back to the estate.”

“How can I trust you?” said Kyra. “You could be trying to help him. I know how much you love him – you were childhood friends.”

Pain flashed across her face. She clutched her cloak more tightly around her shoulders. “Do you think so little of me? Do you still think me a spoilt girl, hysterical perhaps? I thought you were smarter than Rhydian. I was one step ahead of him – I knew something wasn’t right. He made a fool out of me, and my aunt is dead because of him. It doesn’t matter how long we’ve known each other.”

Kyra studied her. All this time, she’d been trapped alongside Rhydian’s noxious plans. Catarina was as much of a victim in this situation as Pearl had been.

“He owes me an explanation,” Catarina added, lifting her chin. “Unless you want to come back to the estate right now and give me one yourself. It sounded like you had more pressing things to do.”

Grudgingly, Kyra nodded. She doubted she’d be going back to the estate after tonight. And Catarina was right – she deserved an explanation about everything that had happened.

Kyra turned to leave, but hesitated. “Don’t let him manipulate you again. You’re not as weak as he thinks you are.”

Catarina smiled faintly. “Of course not. I’ll be queen someday.” Her smile faded, and her expression hardened. “I’ll make him regret this for the rest of his life.”

Kyra nodded. A look of understanding passed between them as the sky groaned. She wasn’t sure she’d ever see the woman again, and she realised she’d come to respect her.

“Will you tell Meredith…?” She trailed off, an unexpected lump in her throat. “Tell her I never meant to lie to her about anything. I liked spending time with her.” She paused. It had probably been better for Meredith – safer – that she hadn’t been involved with all of this. “And I hope she can find happiness, with Ansel.”

A curious look passed over Catarina’s face, but she didn’t ask any more questions. “I’ll tell her. You have my word.”

They left the prince in Catarina’s care, and hurried down the embankment, Kyra close at Nicholas’s heels.

They raced back down to the shore, rain splattering against their faces, as the moon grew several shades darker. Levina and her girls were in a circle in the churning waves, arms raised, hands clasped together. The wind

howled around them, picking up leaves from nearby trees, swirling them above their heads. The air crackled with Levina's powers of air and sea – in the midst of their circle, a whirlpool formed.

Shadowy shapes appeared in the distance behind the group, orange lights dotting the windows – a fleet of ships. The moonlight glinted off their cannons and streaked over the billowing sails.

"The sailors!" Nicholas breathed. "They're here!"

"They're too far away!" Kyra hissed. "They're not going to make it in time – we need to stop her now!" Overhead, the moon was turning the shade of fresh blood. Levina's power was growing. The whirlpool picked up speed, and the waves surged forth in a frenzy. The girls remained stationary through it all, as if locked in a dream. Levina's staff glowed brightly in her hand, making Kyra squint.

"I have to get the staff! The souls inside are giving her power!"

"Kyra, wait—"

She ignored him, ran forwards and leapt into the water headfirst. If *only* she had powers to help her!

The saltwater instantly began the transformation, her legs joining together, merging with a stab of pain and sending ricochets hurtling up her spine and along her body. Her face ached as the scales pushed their way back onto her skin, her ears elongating, ear-fins bursting forth.

Back in her Mer form, she cut through the water, clutching her sword, heading for Levina. She charged at her, leaping from the water, heading for her staff, claws outstretched—

One of the girls grabbed Kyra's wrist, stopping her – with a shove, she pushed Kyra back. Kyra growled, losing her grip on her sword; it was pulled from her grip by the rolling waves. She splashed down into the water and surfaced in time to see Levina's eyes snap open. Her lip curled, the glow of her staff flickering at the interruption to her spell, and her face was contorted by shadow.

"Ah, Kyra," said Levina, in a sickly sweet voice. "How disappointing you are. I'd hoped you would have killed the prince by now. The girls didn't think you had it in you – I had higher hopes. Loss can be a great motivator. It can build greatness."

"What are you talking about?" Kyra demanded. "Why do you care whether or not I kill Rhydian? You got what you needed from him. I heard you, in the wellhouse cave. You don't care if he lives or dies!" She thought

of the girls following her around the estate, leering into her ear, how they were carrying out tasks for Levina, killing people for her. She thought of Levina agreeing to the contract to bring her here, to the estate. She must have known there was a risk Kyra would uncover her plan, but she'd done it anyway. "Were you *testing* me? Trying to bring me onto your side?"

"I test all my girls," said Levina. "I must say, I've never been more let down. You had so much potential, so much anger and bitterness, and you've wasted it by letting Rhydian go. You could have joined us, and done great things. No matter."

"I can't let you do this—"

She raised her staff, ignoring Kyra, and shouted, "Come, Leviathan!"

Thunder crashed overhead, and the waves rose, spilling froth. The ships were drawing nearer, jostled on the waves, cannons angled to fire. A guttural, colossal roar drowned out the sounds of the storm and the beating rain.

"The sea serpent!" Nicholas was shouting from the shallows – she could barely hear him, but he was wading towards the circle of Mer girls.

"Get away from here!" Kyra screeched. They could drown him in an instant.

The serpent rose from the waters behind Levina, a spectral shadow against the red moon.

It was huge, its dark-green back ridged with scales and long, sharp fronds. Two horns jutted from the side of its head, curling back. When it shrieked, a forked purple tongue quavered inside a mouth lined with pincer-sharp teeth. Beady turquoise eyes flashed in the glow of more lightning searing across the pitch-dark sky.

Some of the Mer girls in the group screamed as the serpent roared, rising up behind them.

"Don't be unnerved!" Levina called to them. "Find your focus again! Continue the ritual!"

"We won't let you!" Kyra shouted. *Where* was her sword? She swished her claws around in the water, frantic, but it was gone.

The ships were firing cannons. They splattered into the sea around Levina and her girls, missing them narrowly. A few of the girls dived into the water and fled, while Levina yelled at them to stay and fight. Some of her girls listened to her – they held their ground, hands joined, as she raised her glowing staff to the moon.

“Attack the ships!” Levina ordered the serpent, and the gargantuan creature twisted and dipped into the sea, heading for the fleet.

One of the girls in the circle close to Levina was caught by a blast of cannon fire and flung backwards as the projectile splashed into the water. Kyra surged forwards, into the gap, breaking the surface near to the sea witch while the other girls focused on the ritual.

The serpent was occupied charging the ships, and slammed a hefty tail into the side of one of them, splintering wood and sending both humans and debris flying into the water. The other ships retaliated, cannons blazing in the night. The serpent was struck in the side and shrieked.

Kyra made a grab for the staff – Levina got to her first.

Levina grabbed her by the throat. She was twice as large as Kyra.

“Keep going!” Levina barked at the girls who were still in the circle. Behind Levina, the blood moon was a harsh circle of crimson; even the clouds seemed to be avoiding it and skittering away.

“You thought you could stop me?” Levina snarled, squeezing down on Kyra’s throat. She gasped, flailing in the woman’s grasp, scraping her claws down the back of her hand, cutting her skin. Levina didn’t let go. “You *can’t* stop me,” Levina went on. “You’re weak. Powerless. I can control the wind, the sea, the serpent. What can you control? *Him*?”

Levina jerked her chin at Nicholas. He was in the shallow end of the water, waves crashing around his ankles, grappling with one of Levina’s girls, who was trying to hold him back.

“You came here to destroy,” Levina said, and Kyra gasped under the grip of her hand. “To kill the prince. Why do you care about stopping me? Humans are *nothing*.”

“Why… do… *you*… hate them? Enough to… do this?” Kyra managed.

“Humans used to call upon sea witches to ensure safe voyages, did you know that? My ancestors helped them, and I once helped human men, for all the good it did!” Levina spat. “Humans are weak and will betray you without a second thought. We’re better than them – they’re simply weaker versions of us. Devolved.”

“Someone… betrayed… you…” Kyra choked out.

Levina leaned over and spoke in Kyra’s ear. Lightning flashed over her face, blue and white, her dark eyes blazing. “You haven’t killed Rhydian yet. I knew you’d be too weak – it’s why I wasn’t worried about sending you here. I knew you wouldn’t do it. You’re just like your sister.”

Levina lifted her staff so it was next to Kyra's face, the shining crystal reflecting the red light of the moon. "The seas will rise up and swallow the land. I've already poured some souls into this spell – a few more and it will be done." She glanced at the moon, grinning so widely she showed her sharp teeth. "You can't stop it. Your man over there – I assume he's yours? He will die." Nicholas was still locked in a scuffle with one of the girls; he was doing remarkably well at holding her off, for a human. "Maybe I'll kill him right now, and you can watch."

Kyra's skin was hot with anger. There was no fear, just sizzling rage. Maybe *some* humans were bad – Rhydian certainly had been. He'd broken her sister's heart, schemed with Levina, allowed his own staff to be killed. Nicholas? He was kind, caring. And Meredith – she'd shown Kyra friendship. She worked hard for the sake of her parents, leaving aside her own dreams, and at the expense of her own happiness. Meanwhile, Levina claimed everything she wanted by enlisting the help of dark magic, intent on causing harm.

When she'd come here, she hadn't thought much of humans either. She hadn't wanted to get close to Nicholas, or to anyone else.

But she'd seen a different side of humans.

Levina was still smirking, her smug face close to Kyra's ear. So close Kyra could feel her breath on her cheek. The serpent bashed its tail into another ship, splintering it in half, and wood exploded into the air, dropping into the sea. Sailors screamed out wordlessly. The sea serpent lowered its head, turning, eyes gleaming as it curled towards them.

"I'll have the snake kill him – how about that?" Levina hissed nastily.

The necklace at her throat gleamed. Kyra frowned. It was like the one Rhydian had, for collecting souls, and looked like shiny glasswork. Hadn't Levina said any souls would be transferred to her staff? Why was there one in her necklace?

"Faster, Leviathan!" Levina shouted at the snake, and it picked up pace. Her necklace pulsated with light.

Sucking in a breath, Kyra reached out and snatched the necklace from her chest, crushing it in her hand.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The necklace disintegrated into pieces. The shards dropped into the sea, and a pure white wisp tinged with a haze of dark purple rose up, flooding back towards the sea serpent. The hulking creature stopped wreaking havoc on the ships, its enormous eyes blinking as the sailors continued to fire their cannons.

"No!" Levina screamed.

She let go of Kyra's throat. Kyra plunged into the water again, steadying herself in the waves.

"You took him from me!" Levina roared at Kyra, her face a mask of hatred. "He's *mine*!"

Kyra turned. The serpent was looking at her, still in the water. It blinked, long and slow, and tipped its head, as if *thanking* her.

"You *were* controlling it!" Kyra cried. "Using a piece of his soul!"

"None of this is any of your business!" Levina screeched.

She lifted her free hand, waving her fingers, creating a current of air that churned in front of her. In the fierce wind, her hair and the tendrils around it were churning, making her look even angrier.

Kyra looked back at the giant snake. *Please, help us!* A silent understanding seemed to pass between them as a burst of lightning flashed over the creature's face.

The serpent rushed away from the ships, cutting through the waves – heading for Levina. It rose into the air. Levina cried out in alarm and waved her hand, sending a blast of twisting air at the creature – but its thick, ridged scales and hard body were too strong. More of Levina's girls were abandoning her now, screaming and disappearing below the surface.

"If not you, then her!" Levina roared. She flung her arm at Kyra, launching a burst of powerful air her way, and a wave to go with it.

Kyra was lifted from the water by the wave, and flung through the air. She screamed in alarm – and heard Nicholas's wordless cry beneath the din of the storm – but she couldn't stop herself. Air rushed around her and she slammed into some rocks close to the end of the beach, the air knocked out of her. A rock pool filled with thick seaweed had cushioned some of the fall; pain spasmed through her arm as it took most of her weight.

The serpent shrieked, its rage making the rocks beneath her quiver. It surged towards Levina, who was screaming at the beast to stop, to do as she asked. She sent out more pulses of air, to no avail. When she realised it wasn't going to work, she lunged to the side, propelled by a hurricane of her own making, narrowly avoiding the beast. The creature turned, flicking out its tail – catching her staff and flinging it to the side.

The staff was launched towards the shallows, where it splashed into the water near Nicholas. The girl he'd been fighting with had gone. He snatched up the staff. Kyra dragged herself from the rocks, crying out in pain; she didn't think she could swim decently with her arm like this.

She looked up. The serpent was still after Levina. Nicholas was pulling himself from the shallows and sprinting down the beach towards her.

"Break the staff!" she screamed at him, when he was close enough. "Let the souls free, and she won't be able to use them!"

Nicholas stopped by the rocks near to her, lifting the staff. He dashed the orb off the tip of a sharp, spiky one – it shattered.

Sparkling white mist poured from the staff, creating a haze over the sea. The ships stopped firing their cannons. The souls were pouring from the staff, the ghosts of who they'd once been inside the vapour. Staff members from the estate, wearing their tunics and looking sombre as they rose into the sky. Ruth Darlington was there, swirling with the rest in the star-scattered night until she vanished.

The blood moon started to fade, the sharp crimson shifting to pale grey.

With every soul that faded, the mist cleared.

Until finally, only one remained.

"*Pearl?*" Kyra breathed.

Her sister floated nearby, a wisp of smoke and spray, her tail a glittering beam of light. She looked as if she were made from sea foam, her ear-fins glittering with silver and her expression sad. Her hair streamed out behind her like seagrass.

“I thought you turned to foam – became one with the Sea Mother,” Kyra choked out, the lump in her throat almost making it impossible to speak. “What were you doing in the staff?”

Pearl shook her head and drifted closer. She made as if to touch Kyra’s cheek, seemed to realise she couldn’t, and dropped her ghostly hand. “I *should* have turned to foam. I would have preferred it.” Pearl’s voice echoed, as if she were speaking inside a cave. Had she always spoken so softly, so gently? Kyra had never thought she’d hear that voice again. Her throat ached. “She told me if Rhydian chose someone else and broke my heart,” Pearl continued, “I’d weaken over time and eventually turn to foam. I *did* weaken, and I knew I was dying.”

“What happened?”

“Levina came to me and said I didn’t have much time left. She said she could take me home, to see you and our father. One last time, before I died.” Pearl tipped her head down, gazing at the sea lapping beneath her. “Instead, Levina killed me before I became foam. She put my soul in there.” She motioned to the broken staff in Nicholas’s hands – he was gazing up at her sister, her silver light reflected on his face. “I’m so sorry, Kyra,” Pearl went on. “I wanted to see you one more time. I made so many mistakes.”

“You have nothing to apologise for,” Kyra said, her voice quivering.

“Is he… is he happy, do you know?” Pearl said quietly.

Kyra’s heart squeezed. Tears fell down her cheeks. She’d nearly killed him. And here her sister was, wanting nothing but his happiness. Forgiving him.

“He’s happy,” Kyra said. “You don’t need to worry.”

“And you?” Pearl turned to look at Nicholas, and smiled faintly. “Are you happy?”

“I…” She trailed off. Was she? When she was around Nicholas and Meredith, she did feel happy, and the human world wasn’t as bad as she’d thought it to be.

“You have to live on, Kyra,” Pearl said gently. “Find your happiness and keep hold of it. There’s so much to *love* about humans. Their world is an incredible place, filled with amazing people. There’s so much *good*. Haven’t you seen it?”

Kyra swallowed. “I have.”

“You know what to do, don’t you?” Pearl beamed down at her. “Do what your heart tells you, and I’ll always be proud of you. My big sister.”

Kyra gave a garbled laugh as tears streamed down her cheeks. “I love you,” she said.

“And I love you. Goodbye, Sister.”

With that, the bright form of Pearl disappeared, until there was nothing left but sea and sky.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chaos was unfolding in the sea. The sailors in what remained of the ships were launching cannons at the sea serpent, not realising it had turned on Levina. The beast was clipped several times in the side, and screeched as its thick green scales were wounded and bloodied. Its dark eyes narrowed. It turned on the ships again, dipping its head into the water and sluicing towards the boats, ridges along its back sticking up above the waves.

"Wait, stop!" Kyra screamed – the words were swallowed by the roar of the wind and a crack of lightning.

"Kyra! Are you okay?" Nicholas was slipping and sliding his way towards Kyra across the rocks. He splashed into the small pool she'd fallen into, kneeling at her side and touching her shoulder. "Are you hurt?"

"Just my arm – I'm fine." She winced as she tried to move.

"You're not fine, let's get you onto the shore and—"

"This is all *your* doing!" bellowed Levina.

Her words filled the momentary gap in the storm's fury, and she was close – closer than Kyra had realised. She was behind Nicholas, riding the frenzied waves, allowing them to buoy her up, her claws outstretched. Her hair and the dark tendrils atop her head flickered like snakes' tongues, and she licked her lips hungrily. The storm blazed behind her.

"Nicholas!" Kyra screamed. "Look out!"

It was too late. Levina was on him, and she snatched him into her claws, the waves pulling them both back, out of Kyra's reach. His sword clattered to the stone beside her. She cried out in agony as she extended her arm, trying to save him in those precious moments and failing.

Levina had hold of him tightly, and in spite of his struggling, he couldn't free himself. Her claws dug into his flesh.

“There will be other blood moons!” Levina cried. She said something else that was eclipsed by the roaring of the sea serpent, and the ships being smashed to pieces. Thunder boomed. “I can drown *him* instead, for the time being!”

Kyra tore herself from the rocks, snatching up Nicholas’s sword. Ignoring the screaming pain in her arm, she pushed herself into the water and propelled herself towards them just as Nicholas was dropped into the sea with a splash. Levina was holding his head under so he couldn’t breathe.

Not him!

As Kyra closed in on them, Levina flung a strong current of air at her that shoved her backwards, ruining her momentum. *No!* She had to get to them. She couldn’t let him drown! She pushed against it furiously, with everything she had. Every emotion she’d felt since coming here was poured into her efforts: her anger at Rhydian, grief and loss at losing her sister, confusion at the human world – and her feelings for Nicholas.

Power rushed into her body – her scales crackled with it. The storm above was like a living, breathing being that she could sense. The air currents sang to her. The sea around her was more alive than it had ever been before, expanding and swaying like a lung.

Power. I have power! It’s woken up!

Drawing on the power that filled her, she broke through the sea witch’s barrier and built a swirling vortex behind her in the sea. It churned, a wave building, pushing her up and onwards. She shot out of the water towards Levina, sword in hand, riding the wave, aiming at her chest.

The sword pierced the witch’s heart.

Levina screamed. Her hands flew to her breast as she let go of Nicholas and cradled her injury, her eyes wide and fearful. She made a choked sound, as if trying to speak.

The pain in Kyra’s arm was like knives, and it was spreading to her shoulder. She ignored it and dived. Nicholas was a shadowy form floating down below, hair a dark halo about his head. The dark waters were trying to claim him.

Kyra reached for him, grabbing him beneath the armpits and hauling him to the surface. Her arm cried out for her to stop, to rest. Instead, she kept pulling him, dragging him to the shallows despite the sharp, searing pain. She dropped him onto the sand.

“Nicholas!” She hauled herself up above him, ignoring the agony in her arm. Her sister’s advice about resuscitation – so long ago now – raced through her mind. She sucked in a lungful of air, pressing her mouth to his, breathing into him, willing him to live. She pressed her knuckles into his chest, trying to get his heart beating. “Nicholas, please!”

She tried again, pressing and breathing, pressing and breathing. Tears streamed down her cheeks and she could no longer hear the sea serpent, the storm, the cannon fire. The only thing that mattered was him. She couldn’t lose someone who had come to mean so much to her.

Kyra breathed into him again.

He jerked up, spitting a mouthful of water onto the sand and hunching over as his body was racked by coughs.

She flung her arms around him, despite the fact that he was coughing and barely coherent – and despite the stabbing pain in her own arm. She didn’t care about her injury, only that he was alive. When he’d collected himself, he held on to her shoulders, gasping for air.

“You saved me,” he choked out. His hair was sticking to his forehead and he looked pale and shaken. “Th-Thank you… Where’s Levina?”

“Gone,” said Kyra. “The sword training paid off.” She smiled. “And I finally seemed to have developed powers of my own.”

“You have?”

“In part thanks to you.”

He beamed at her, but his smile faded when he turned to the ships carrying his sailor friends. Only two had been left in one piece – the sea serpent was retreating, bloodied and bruised; a piece of wood was sticking out of its side from the scuffle. It seemed to have decided that leaving the battle alive was better than staying to end up dead, like Levina.

All was still – even the storm was ebbing away, the thunder petering out and the sky clear of lightning. The rain slowed to a pitter-patter. The sailors’ shouts echoed across the bay.

“We need to help them,” said Nicholas, struggling to his feet.

“Let me,” she said, shifting back into the deeper parts of the water, the waves lapping at her torso. She was about to dive when someone spoke behind her.

“We’ll help too, Daughter.”

She turned. Her father, Einar, was in the midst of the water, and one by one, other Mer folk were rising up around him – men and women of the

wardens, holding their shining tridents, their glittering chest-plates gleaming silver in the moonlight. They'd come. They were late, but they were here. A lump rose in Kyra's throat and she swam to her father, throwing her arms around his neck. Her arm spasmed with pain again, and she winced, but held on.

"You came. I'm so sorry," she blurted. "I thought you'd never want to see me again."

Einar was stiff in her grip – he'd never been particularly fond of displays of affection in public – but she didn't let go. He reached up and stroked her hair.

"Of course," he said hoarsely. "You're my daughter. I'll always be here for you." Her face was pressed to his shoulder, but she heard the smile in his voice. "And it seems you've put things right here today. Is Levina…?"

"She's gone, and she won't be coming back. I-I had to," she spluttered, suddenly feeling the need to defend what she'd done. She'd come here to kill Rhydian, and she'd ended up killing a sea witch instead. Was there a rule against that, at home? She didn't know. "You know what she was going to do – I told you, in my message."

"I know, and I understand," said Einar. "No one blames you. We came here today to support you. And the Mer King appreciated your honesty."

"Aren't you worried about being seen?" Kyra drew back and glanced over her shoulder, at Nicholas. He was already aware Mer existed, but her father didn't know that.

"When you sent the message, we took it to the king at once," Einar explained. "He may not want us to be exposed to the human world, but he isn't a tyrant – he doesn't want to see it sink. He made an exception. We brought some powerful siren-song powder, and thought perhaps we could use it on any humans that might encounter us. If we use it, they should think us little more than a dream when the effects wear off."

"Good. Because we have to hurry and help the sailors."

"As you wish." Einar nodded at the gathered wardens. One by one, they dove into the waters, charting a path to the rubble and debris of the ships, floating in the sea in the distance.

Einar remained with her. He studied Nicholas.

"This is Nicholas," said Kyra. "He's the one who's been helping me. He already knows about Mer… Don't worry, he hasn't told anyone about us, and he isn't going to. You can trust him."

“I hope that’s the case,” said Einar, and he gripped his trident harder. “You took a risk, trusting a human.” He shook his head. “Like your sister.”

“This isn’t like that. He brought the sailors here to help with Levina—”

“I can see that.” Einar sighed. “I’m not chastising you. If I’d been more understanding with Pearl from the start, maybe she’d still be…”

His voice tapered off. She had so much to tell him, and tears sprang to her eyes when she thought of her sister’s ghostly form hanging in the sky. He’d been too late to see her, but she could tell him about it. She squeezed him in her arms and drew back. There would be time for talk later.

They rescued around thirty sailors, and the Mer used the siren-song powder on them afterwards; most of them now slept in the bowels of the two remaining ships, which were anchored and still in the water. When they woke, their memories of events would be hazy, almost a dream. There had been so much loss. Ships destroyed, men and women missing.

Nicholas stood on the deck of one of the ships, alone. Kyra’s father had spread a paste on her arm to help with the pain, and he floated in the water nearby; the rest of the Mer wardens had gone home, now their work here was done. Kyra was holding the watertight box containing her sister’s journal. She’d retrieved it from where she’d hidden it in the deep hollow of a tree – and she was grateful to see the journal was inside, undamaged by the storm and safe.

“You’ll be able to go back to the estate now, if you want,” Kyra said slowly, and an uncomfortable lump was lodged in her throat. “Catarina will make sure Rhydian is put in his place. He won’t be telling anyone else what happened, unless he wants to admit to using dark magic and land himself in trouble.” She smiled faintly. “I’m already in trouble with my own people.”

“What do you mean?” said Nicholas, leaning over the side of the ship and frowning at her.

“Our rules are clear,” Einar explained. “Although Kyra has atoned in my eyes here today, the king does not allow the use of tainted magic. He’s appreciative of what she has done in drawing our attention to Levina’s wrongdoings, but she won’t be allowed to return home with me. She’ll live on the fringes of our society, in exile. A lonely existence. I don’t want that for her.” He placed a clawed hand on Kyra’s shoulder, his eyes sad. “I never wanted this for you.”

“I know,” Kyra replied. “I had to do all of this. And now I realise if I hadn’t, Levina might have succeeded. If I have to be in exile for that, so be it.”

“Kyra…” Nicholas’s words were so faint; they were like a whisper of wind on the ocean. “I don’t want to lose you. Not now.”

“Well…” she said. “I do have a plan. And you could always join me, in the sea. If you wanted to,” she added hastily.

“W-What?” Nicholas managed. “A human? Living in the sea? How?”

“I’m not saying permanently,” said Kyra. She laughed. “I’ve actually come to like the world up there. I’d like to see more of it. First, I… I want to find a way to shift between forms permanently, without the potion. My sister thought it was possible. I’m sure Levina has *plenty* of things in her Lacuna to help me find a way. We were never meant to be so divided – and I want both.” She held up her hand, lifting a vial of potion that had been in her cross-body bag. “I have some potion left. You can drink it and become a Mer, and come on this journey with me, or… or you can return to Nethervale without me. I’m not sure how long this will take me, or when I might walk on land next.”

She swallowed hard. She wanted him to say yes. She wouldn’t admit her feelings to him now – it would only make it harder, and it wouldn’t be fair. He had to make this decision for himself, not for her. So, she waited. The sailors were quiet, the only sounds the wind whistling around the rocks and an owl hooting somewhere over on the shoreline.

“Well,” said Nicholas, and her eyes widened – he was unbuttoning his shirt. “It’d be much easier to help sea life being *under* the sea, wouldn’t it? Didn’t I tell you that before?”

Kyra squealed in excitement as Nicholas dove into the water with a great splash. Beside her, her father boomed a laugh. Nicholas swam towards her, treading water at her side, a huge grin on his face, his hair dripping and floppy. She moved nearer and put her arms around his neck, and he held her close, so close their noses were almost touching.

“You know,” he said, his voice a breathy whisper, so Einar couldn’t hear, “I never thought I’d fall in love with a mermaid.”

Her scales shivered, all the way down to the fronds of her tail. He was coming with her because he felt the same way.

“And I never thought I’d love a human,” she told him. “But here we are.”

“Here we are,” he agreed, and pressed his saltwater lips to hers.

Epilogue

Many moons after Nicholas had agreed to come with her, Kyra swam through the sea with him at her side. He'd overcome the pain of the transformation quickly back then, and now that so much time had passed, he was able to perform loops in the water as comfortably as any Mer born in the sea. His tail was a deep bluish grey, with ridges running up the front and back, the tip extending out into a swathe of fronds that reminded her of the trees up on land. Fins protruded from his lower arms and elbows, and a collection of green and blue scales ran across his chest and face. He'd cut his hair shorter, and what was left stuck up in small spikes. He looked perfect, and he seemed to happy down in the water.

"You know, when we first left, I didn't think you'd take to this quite so well," she called, stopping to watch him, a smile stretching over her face.

"Why *wouldn't* I?" he said, finishing another loop and coming to a stop in front of her. "It's incredible down here. I've been here for *months* and I can still find things to amaze me. I almost never want to go back. *Almost*," he clarified, when she made a clicking sound of disbelief with her teeth.

"I hope what we're up to doesn't cause more problems," she said. "If word gets out that I'm pursuing dark magic again, after everything that's happened…"

Nicholas swished his tail, so the long fronds came to rest against the side of her own tail, brushing against her scales. He reached up to touch her chin. She hadn't got used to the sight of him with webbed hands yet.

"Don't worry. We're doing this for a good cause. You want to unite the species, build bridges? This is the place to start. When we can shift between two forms at will, it'll be easier for us to do that. And maybe, if we can achieve that goal, the Mer king will pardon you, and you won't have to live in exile any longer."

“That would be nice, but I don’t know how he’d feel about me using dark magic to achieve that aim.”

“He won’t know, so long as we don’t tell anyone. If we can do this, we’ll have done the world some good, anyway. Your father’s started to show an interest in the human world. He might be able to convince the king to reach out to the surface, too.”

Kyra smiled. “Father’s trying, and his friends have certainly been welcoming of you,” she conceded. “But you’re one man. The world up there…” She gestured to where the sun seemed to shine purple through the surface, spilling light down into the ocean. “It’s much bigger than that.”

“You seem to like this *one man*,” he said, shifting his fingers to her lips.

She smirked. “Like? That’s an understatement.”

He huffed bubbles through his nose as he laughed, then leaned forwards, pressing his lips against hers. She melted into his kiss, and he snaked his arms around her, drawing her close. The feel of his tail pressing up against hers made her shudder.

When they broke apart, she said, “You’re not worried that we might have to explore dark magic to do this? To keep shifting between forms?”

“I’m not worried about it, so long as we’re together,” he said, pressing his nose to hers.

“I imagine most start out with good intentions, and… they stumble, go wrong,” Kyra said. “Like my sister. Like me.”

“Well, I won’t let you stumble again.” Nicholas lifted her hand, kissing along the backs of her fingers and the fine webbed skin between them. He had always been handsome, even as a human, but the glittering green scales along his cheeks and the bridge of his nose made her want to hold him close, to press her lips to every part of him. Every time she looked at him, she remembered what she was doing, why she was doing it. Nicholas leaned in, kissing her on the lips, and she tasted the salty sea air mingling with their kiss.

“I believe you,” she whispered. “We can do this – together.”

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About the Author

Rachel Rowlands is an author and freelance editor from North West England, and holds a degree in English and Creative Writing. She's worked on hundreds of books for publishing houses (including some of the largest in the UK) and for independent authors. Rachel grew up playing video games like the *Final Fantasy* series, and devouring any book she could get her hands on – and never grew out of her love for the fantasy genre.

Website: https://www.racheljrowlands.com/
Author newsletter:
https://www.racheljrowlands.com/newsletter/

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